Black.Smoking.Angel [English]

Hazo

#6 in Post-apocalyptic

In Progress

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Black.Smoking.Angel
[English]

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Summary

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Description:

I’m no hero, I’m no martyr, and by no means I’m a victim. Those described on the next pages will only be good or bad depending on what the reader thinks of them. I, however… Some time ago I was a soldier, and I killed following orders, then I was a survivor and I killed for food. Later I was a mercenary and I killed for a better life, and then I was a guardian and I killed for someone else. If any of those deaths meant something? I try not to think about it, and I don’t answer that kind of questions while sober. Sometimes I feel like I can’t find meaning in life, and that I keep pushing for a sole objective: to find, in this ruin of a world full of dead cities, peace for the last valuable thing I have: Angelique.

Chapter One: Angelique I

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August 31, 2031

Entertainment media led us to believe, through movies, video games, comics, or TV series, that a man who has never touched a weapon in his life can grab two 1911 pistols from a desk, shoot with perfect aim, and emerge unscathed after killing all his enemies. After such a feat, the individual would simply walk away as if nothing had happened.

When did we allow ourselves to be lied to so much? Is obtaining a bit of entertainment worth accepting an ideal of reality that is completely false?

Tunnel vision, palpitations, cold sweat, tremors, incontinence, excessive stress, dizziness. Fear. Many

soldiers turn their fear into their driving force. During a shootout, one keeps moving and responding purely due to the horrible intensity of the fear they endure.

In your hands, a revolver with only two bullets, and behind you, a pillar fifty centimetres wide receiving a heavy barrage of rifle ammunition. In a situation like that, everything that cannot ensure your survival ceases to exist for you. The voices of your comrades, the sound of casings falling, the elevated room temperature… nothing. It's just you with your laboured breathing, your weapon, and the insistent drumming of bullets behind you.

Everything is so false. Everything to which we've been accustomed for decades turned out to be so false… Me? I'm just another product born out of all that falseness. The difference is, unlike your average citizen who goes to the office every day with the intention of doing as little work as possible, just letting the hours pass while discreetly ogling the younger colleague's ass, and then going back home to watch TV until falling asleep, I was forced to

delve deeper into this falsehood we talk so much about. I was once that consumer product the office worker saw on his television and thought, “those men are real men facing death without fear,” unaware that in my role as a soldier, I’ve seen more guys crying like little children, begging to see their mothers one last time before dying from bullets lodged in their lungs than I care to remember.

I am a former soldier, named Alez and with the last name Braviel. I apologize in advance if my writings end up disappointing you, as you won’t find the story of a war hero deserving thousands of medals within these pages. You won’t even find a story you want to identify with. This will just be one more story; you can take from it what you want or even forget it, I don’t mind. Just don’t forget her; that’s a small favor I dare to ask of you, reader.

September, 2030

Clutched on a strap, my Benelli M4 shotgun hung at my front. Another strap secured the reliable G36 rifle on my back, which I had stolen from a German soldier months ago. On my right side, snug in its holster, rested my 92FS pistol, and on my back, alongside my rifle, hung my backpack loaded with various essentials such as ammunition, food, and some items of clothing. The magazines for my weapons were stored in the inner pockets of my long coat, pockets I had sewn myself. In general terms, one could say that I carried a lot of weight.

“Wait, let me stop for a moment.”

I walked heavily towards the nearest wall and leaned my back against it while releasing a sigh, hoping it could dispel my fatigue.

“If you don’t take off the backpack, the food will get squashed.”

“Oh…”

Reluctantly, but nodding in agreement as there was truth in her words, I took off the backpack and placed it beside me. I closed my eyes for a few seconds, rubbing my nasal bridge, then lifted my head slightly to reassess the situation. I opened my eyes. We were walking along the sidewalk of a wide avenue, dilapidated commercial establishments with shattered glass scattered everywhere. The trees that had been planted to adorn the area had grown wildly and looked invasive. I wasn’t sure of the exact date, but the air hinted at the changing season from summer to autumn, so it’s safe to assume we were in September.

Some birds flew back and forth in the cloudy sky, often perching from bush to bush. For them, things had changed for the better — the abandoned cities were now owned by birds free to live without civilization bothering them. A large tree stood a few meters away, and in its canopy, I saw two sparrows apparently passing through. As soon as I spotted them, they took flight rapidly, their wings flapping at

full speed to distance themselves and disappear from my sight. The motion they caused when leaving the branches was enough to make some slightly dried leaves fall. One of those leaves gracefully descended, twirling in the air until it landed right on the head of the young girl who observed me with her impassive face, unable to conceal itself among her black hair.

“Hm?”

I reached out my hand to her, picking up the brownish leaf with two fingers.

“Yes, we are definitely entering autumn.”

As was customary, Angelique contributed nothing to that one-sided conversation. Angelique. That was the name of the girl accompanying me then, and still does. Standing in front of me with a

UMP 45 submachine gun in her slender hands and a pistol on her hip, she patiently awaited my command to proceed. That was always Angelique, with an air of absence but with a look of profound presence, silent and calm, waiting for orders.

“You can sit for a few minutes if you’re tired too.”

“No, I’m fine for now.”

Angelique suffers from amnesia. She doesn’t remember anything that happened before she met me — not her age, nor her real name. Yes, Angelique is just the name I chose for her.

“Are you really okay? Isn’t your backpack too heavy?”

“No, I can handle it.”

“…”

“Your backpack is much worse, Alez.”

“I’m used to it.”

Her body is small. If I had to guess her age based on her physical development, I couldn’t say she was more than thirteen or fourteen, but her voice, her face, and her silhouette suggested she might be fifteen or sixteen. Despite her small frame, Angelique quickly adapted to firing an automatic weapon. Her modest arms developed some strength, and her tibial muscles acquired some rigidity. It was inevitable, after all — walking all day, every day, carrying so much weight had to have its consequences.

“We’ll continue along this avenue until it ends. If we’re lucky, we might find a place that hasn’t been looted and get something useful. Although I see that as very unlikely.”

I fumbled through my many pockets until I found the small metal box where I keep my cigarettes. I remember having about seven left. I took one of them and lit it with the refillable lighter also stored in that little box.

“So, once we finish with this long street, we’ll resume the route to the northeast. Maybe we’ll have better luck there. The entire west is finished, and considering that even Croatia fell, the south most likely is too.”

“And if it’s as destroyed as everything else?”

“Then we’ll head southeast.”

“And if we don’t find anything there either?”

“Then… we’ll retrace our steps to see if Western Europe has been reclaimed.”

“And what if-?”

“Can’t get it out of your head?”

By that time, Angelique and I had been traveling together for about two and a half years. We started from France, crossed Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, went down through the Czech Republic, then Slovakia and Hungary to avoid Austria. When we reached Croatia, we decided to give up on the south since the outlook was increasingly bleak. Every country we set foot in was either a no-man’s-land or retained its government in an extremely small sector of the capital, heavily militarized

enough to be called military governments even if the head of state was elected by the country's inhabitants. We heard that Switzerland still stood, to no one's surprise, but entry to the country was strictly forbidden for anyone, whoever they were.

Initially, the goal was to survive. But how long could we stay alive alone on this continent that I had helped destroy? Bandits, food scarcity, military presence, restricted areas, the Amere group, heat, and cold—everything around us was extremely hostile, and our luck wouldn't last forever. That was when I decided to find a peaceful place for this girl to live, but that sounded easier than it really was. It wasn't a hasty decision; I had been toying with the idea for about a year, trying to ignore it, because giving up meant taking away any chance for this girl to have a truly peaceful life.

"I understand that walking so much that it seems like there's no end can tire anyone, but I still need to ask you to be patient."

She only nodded. Yes, to almost all my statements, all she did was nod. I thought that once her trust in me increased, she would open up and become more friendly. But no, that was just Angelique's way. Seemingly cold and distant, with little interest in discussing anything.

"That's enough for now, let's continue."

I stubbed out the cigarette on the wall and stored it again in the metal box. I picked up the backpack, and without saying anything more since anything I said would provoke no response, I continued my march along that devastated avenue. Immediately, I heard the hurried steps of that girl following me. It no longer bothered me. Talking to myself had become a habit for me many years ago; the only difference now was that someone heard my words.

"We'll advance as long as we're allowed. We'll figure out how to overcome any adversity later."

“Alez.”

“Yes?”

“I’m not sure, but… I think I heard something.”

I had only taken about ten steps, but I stopped abruptly and turned to look at Angelique.

“Are you sure?”

“No, right at that moment, you were talking, and it’s not impossible that I’m just confused.”

Silence.

I kept my gaze fixed on Angelique without saying anything while gripping my shotgun with both hands.

Angelique has been my ears since I met her. I can’t rely on my sense of hearing, so I have to trust her completely to detect strange noises. It took about a minute before she opened her mouth again and barely raised her eyebrows forward.

“Yes, now I can be sure. There are people talking up ahead.”

“Can you discern how many people?”

“Maybe three, that is… a bit more complicated.”

“How much farther ahead?”

“About a hundred meters.”

“We have the advantage. We’re in territory not claimed by any force, so they might just be looters. We’ll proceed with direct elimination, Angelique.”

“Understood.”

Angelique changes when it comes to fighting. Her tone stops sounding so monotonous and becomes almost mechanical; it’s terrifying. Not only that, her movements become perfect. She holds her weapon with such proper posture that it would be the envy of any novice soldier; her hands don’t waste strength with improper grips, and her celestial eyes acquire the edge of a blade. I often wondered if I wasn’t accompanied by a child soldier.

This was common for us; almost every week, we killed at least two people, so there was no doubt about what we had to do. I had a shotgun, and Angelique had a submachine gun, so I was the one going in front. We pressed against the nearest wall and walked quickly and cautiously forward. Viewing the world through the iron sights of my shotgun made everything look much more fragile. Anything, regardless of its resistance, would not survive a 12-gauge shot from two meters away.

“Angelique.”

I stopped in place and decided to gain more visual information about our surroundings. Without lowering my weapon, I leaned my torso a bit to the side to see the buildings ahead and then paid attention to the one directly next to us. There wasn’t a single two-story building until about three hundred meters ahead; there were only more and more dilapidated commercial spaces.

“Go up; it will broaden our options. I’ll continue down here, and we’ll advance together. I want you to open fire without asking for permission once you confirm the number of targets.”

“Understood.”

I released my Benelli and clasped my hands to give Angelique a platform to jump and climb onto the roof. It was always so easy for her. Of short stature and with such a light body, it was as if she had the agility of a cat.

I signaled to advance with two fingers, and we continued our assault. Despite the height difference, we were still close to each other, which made us feel secure, as it always had been. Our steps were fast, and our concentration absolute. Yes, we had the advantage, but what good would that advantage be if we didn’t know how to use it? There was still the possibility that we had been spotted by the enemy, and we were walking into a trap.

Only once I got close enough could I see that a few dozen meters ahead, between two shops, ran a narrow alley, from which I could now hear voices escaping. I tightened my grip on the shotgun and put my index finger on the trigger; I was more than ready to take down any stranger who entered my field of view.

“Ange—”

“Tch!”

During the time I took my eyes off her, Angelique had advanced quite a bit. She looked at me from the roof, covering her lips with a vertically positioned finger to indicate that I shouldn’t speak.

I nodded once and waited for instructions. I was fifteen meters from the entrance to the alley, a

distance I could close in three seconds, while Angelique was crouched just five meters above the alley. At this distance, the voices were clear even to me, and it was evident that it was more of a heated argument than a conversation.

Angelique is quick and makes no unnecessary movements; seeing her move in a combat situation is truly satisfying. I think I became addicted at some point to the lightness with which her silhouette moves when she has a weapon in her hands.

She stretched out an open hand toward me, allowing me to clearly see the five fingers of her slender hand. Five enemies. She didn’t take more time and turned toward the alley. She didn’t even give me time to confirm that I was ready to enter. Not only that, but fleetingly, she closed the distance; she was about to open fire, so I had to take my position as soon as possible, or the improvised two-pronged attack wouldn’t work. I ran at full speed toward the entrance of the ruined alley, but I heard the first shot when I was half a second away.

Angelique squeezed as much juice as she could from the element of surprise and eliminated one of the five men with a precise shot to the top of the head, abruptly interrupting their heated conversation. She didn’t give them time to take cover, as just when I was putting my first foot in my designated spot, she swept the area with automatic fire to break any possible chance of a quick counterattack.

The shotgun butt weighed heavily on my shoulder and provided my hands with enough support to move freely. When I finally saw the men whose lives we were about to take, the nerves I had been accumulating since Angelique went up to the roof slowly liquefied.

Their torn and battered clothes, all young except for one—the first to die—and barely armed. The corpse was crushing an AK, and the one closest to me, facing away, had a revolver in his left hand; the others only had knives or iron rods. But it was too

late to think about the disproportion of our employed force; we were already in combat.

“Angelique! Don’t waste ammo!”

“Understood!”

I opened fire, and the rest is predictable. With the first shot, I shattered the back of the head of the only target carrying a firearm. That man didn’t finish falling, and I was already firing at the side of another person’s head. The long gun shook violently, releasing luminous flashes. Hot empty casings flew one after another with each of my shots. I destroyed the chest of the third and then shot him in the face to ensure death. The last one alive had jumped over the corpse of the first to grab the AK, but his motor functions were halted instantly by four .45 bullets fired by Angelique that hit his neck and head. It was a small-scale massacre.

“Do you see any other movement? Hear anything?”

“No.”

The assault lasted no more than three seconds and left us with the burden of five more lives. A rate of one death every 0.6 seconds.

I swept my hair back with one hand and stared at the deformed head of the second dead man, thinking about how little life was worth in our small apocalypse.

“Alez, help me down.”

“Yes, jump.”

I released my weapon and opened my arms to serve as Angelique’s landing pad. She jumped and landed on me, wrapping herself around my neck, to which I firmly squeezed her soft torso to give her confidence. Before letting her go, I couldn’t resist the urge to reach one hand to her head and give her a small caress.

“You did well. As always.”

She simply nodded once and separated from me, giving me a modest smile. She never said anything about it, but it was evident in the way she avoided looking at the bodies of the men she killed, as much as possible. She may have been accustomed to killing, but she never stopped being just a girl.

I, on the other hand, walked among the corpses, nudging them with the barrel of my Benelli as I reloaded.

“They don’t have anything useful for us…”

I turned the last man killed by Angelique face up and focused on his face for a few seconds. He was really young, maybe a year older than Angelique. When did scenes like this stop making my chest ache?

“Let’s go, we have nothing to do here.”

Having regained her usual composure, my young companion only let out an almost inaudible “yes” and walked beside me to continue the journey down the deserted avenue, adorned with overturned cars and fallen power poles.

“Don’t forget to change the magazine.”

“Oh.”

Clearly, she had forgotten, judging by her expression. Perhaps, trying to avoid a scolding, she was quick to replace the almost empty magazine of her UMP with a full one she had inside her jacket.

. . .

We walked in silence for about another hour until we reached the end of the avenue. It collided with a two-story mansion, surrounded by an extensive fence that covered almost an entire block. The facade of the mansion was in much better condition than one would expect. Black walls and a red tile roof, along with a wide chimney protruding from the center of the building. The iron of the fence was rusted, making it easy to knock down the metal gate to enter the property.

“What are we going to do in this place?”

“If the inside of the mansion is in as good a condition as the exterior, we will stay here.”

“Are we going to spend the night here?”

“Tonight and the next. And the next, and the next.”

“I do not understand…”

I lazily crossed the garden, looking on both sides. A brick path led from the sidewalk to the front door of the house. The grass on either side was truly overgrown, measuring about fifty centimeters tall.

“Alez, can you explain to me what…”

I didn’t respond. I placed my hand on the doorknob as I pulled my Beretta from its holster. To my surprise, the door wasn’t locked, so I opened it and entered the mansion with my gun ready to shoot down any stranger who might be inside. I could also hear Angelique removing the safety from her UMP.

“No one’s here.”

My little hunch was correct. This mansion had never been looted or occupied by anyone. Upon entering, we found a spacious and dark living room with many doors and, at the end, a staircase that split into two on the second floor for easy access to both wings of the building. A large set of sofas, a small table in the middle on an extensive rug, and an elegant stone fireplace. There were no paintings on the walls, but there were still embedded nails, leading me to think that the property owners must have taken the most valuable things when they abandoned it. Everything was covered in dust but in very good condition. There weren’t even footprints on the floor disturbing the thick layer of dust.

“It needs work, but it holds potential.”

I holstered my weapon and turned to look at Angelique. Her expression was one of clear confusion, and she looked at me as if I had gone mad.

“What do you think?”

“About what?”

“About the house.”

“It looks cozy, I suppose.”

“Perfect. It’s ours now.”

Angelique's face went from confusion to disbelief. She lowered her submachine gun and stared at me with wide-open eyes, unable to believe that I, who had never stayed in the same place for more than a day, was deciding to stop traveling once and for all. She looked adorable.

"Ours? Are we going to live here? What about going northeast?"

"I changed my mind."

"But just today you were so determined and…"

"I'm also tired of walking, Angelique. We'll take ownership of this mansion, make whatever repairs are needed, and live here. And… we'll wait. We're together, and we're armed, we can defend ourselves. If we run out of food, we'll find more. If there's no

more to find, then we'll hunt. It might take years or even a whole decade, but every war must end someday. This will be our bunker until that day comes."

"…"

"If you hate the idea, then we'll continue on our way, and we'll forget this conversation ever happened."

A whole minute of complete silence. Today, I understand that she wasn't deciding if she wanted to stay in that mansion or not; she was trying to guess if I genuinely wanted to stop or if I was only doing it to please her. Angelique can be inconsiderate, but she's not a selfish person.

"…"

She nodded without saying a word, and it brought a smile to my face. The rest is less interesting. We cleaned the place from top to bottom and rearranged everything to our liking. It had everything we needed: from beds to wardrobes, a well-stocked kitchen, and clothes of various sizes. Also, an electric generator and a grand piano, but I'll leave the details for later. We still live in that mansion, in this dead village in the southwest of Poland, patiently waiting for the war to end and civilization to settle back into these forgotten streets.

Chapter Two: Angelique II

+

Spring, 2028

“How cute…”

“Besides that shed, there’s not a single building in sight, and the way the land slopes makes it seem endless…”

Angelique and I stood in a vast field. Beside us was a small structure resting along the dirt path that had brought us there. The sky was mostly clear, with occasional clouds covering the sun intermittently, creating a soothing and almost drowsy atmosphere, punctuated by distant bird songs. Above us, an endless blue expanse with white patches, and below, an apparently eternal path of white flowers swaying

gently when the wind decided to blow. The path was wide, bordered only by forest on both sides. In the distance, the land rose gently, preventing any further view and creating an illusion about the path's length. Regarding the type of plants, even today, three years and a bit later, I have no idea.

"Let's keep going, we need to make use of the daylight. This place must have belonged to someone, and it's likely we'll find their house if we continue through the flowers."

I didn't expect a response from Angelique and, without removing my hands from my rifle, I advanced over the vast white sheet, hardly worrying about stepping on one plant or another.

"We'll take supplies there, and if we find one, a map. Just moving by cardinal directions is…"

It was normal for our conversations to be 95% my words, but what wasn't normal was not hearing her footsteps behind me. I stopped as soon as I noticed this irregularity and turned, slightly concerned.

"…"

Angel was crouched on the ground, fixated on a single flower that was no different from the rest; literally just another in the bunch. Her face was as impassive as ever, but her eyes were a bit wider, showing keen interest in the small blossom with several petals.

"Angel, we need to keep moving."

Of course, I understood that while that field was merely charming to me, for Angelique, it could be a utopian scene she never imagined existed. She only

had a few months of memories, and they were filled with death, ruins, and bad people. I couldn’t blame her for being so captivated by this sight… but we couldn’t afford to stop.

“Ah… Yes, let’s go.”

Upon hearing my voice call her name, she quickly collected herself and stood up, hurrying towards me. We continued our journey without much haste, enjoying the peaceful sensation the landscape provided. After a few minutes, the wind began to blow slightly stronger, but not enough to be bothersome; on the contrary, it was pleasant, lifting the aroma released by the flowers.

Angelique beside me couldn’t keep her senses in check and couldn’t hide it, no matter how hard she tried. Her eyes gently roamed the field, appreciating the individuality of each flower, while her back straightened a little every time a breeze brought the earthy scent to our noses.

First five, then ten, and then fifteen minutes passed. The path was long, and the tranquility it exuded only made my weapon feel heavier. At some point, both Angel and I grew sluggish, and we slowed our pace.

“The owners of this field must have taken great care of it… If you look to the sides, only a few shoots extend beyond the path… there’s not much weed either. For it to have been preserved so well… I wonder how long it’s been abandoned.”

“…”

“A while ago, you were really captivated by the color of the flowers. I understand if you want to take one or two, but let me tell you it’s useless; they’ll wither too soon.”

“No.”

“Hm? No what?”

“I don’t want to take one.”

“Any particular reason?”

“They look much prettier all together than apart.”

As Angel uttered her last words, she lifted her left hand, revealing two individual flowers she had apparently picked without my noticing.

“… Yes, that’s also a good reason.”

We stood in silence for a few seconds until a stronger gust than before blew through, lifting some pollen along with many petals.

“Huh…”

1

Angel raised her hand to shield her eyes, and the flowers she held were carried away with the fragments of their siblings. The corollas soared high, drifting into the forest, soon disappearing from my view. Before the wind ceased, I glanced back at Angelique. She still covered part of her face with one hand against the wind that showed no sign of stopping. The scene before me was sublime.

“You are…”

I swallowed my words and just observed. Angel’s shy face barely hidden from the wind that tousled her shoulder-length hair violently, and the hundreds

of petals behind her. The field's aroma, the sun's warmth, and the cool breeze made me realize that, even if such a beautiful scene seemed like it was from a postcard, no camera in the world could capture such beauty, nor could any artist paint a work that evoked in me what this sight did. Beautiful. Angel simply looked beautiful. To use more words or try to define how would only complicate the matter unnecessarily. I dare say I had never seen anything that moved me so, and all the horrors I had witnessed paled in comparison to the impact of this young woman who, just by standing there shielding her eyes, took my breath away.

"I didn't hear you well."

"Forget it, it wasn't important."

But it was.

My face probably expressed at least a fraction of what I felt, because Angel tilted her head slightly in doubt.

“Angel, are you cold?”

“No. The wind is refreshing, but the sun is quite strong.”

My clothes were much heavier and shielded me from the elements, but Angelique, aside from the thin long jacket that offered some protection, wore shorts that might let more of the chill through.

I waited a few seconds, then exhaled a short sigh as I secured my Galil and let it fall to the side.

“Alez?”

“I’ve decided we’ll rest here. It’s only been a few hours since sunrise and we’ve been walking a long time.”

She didn’t even think to contradict me and nodded.

I let my body’s weight take over and sat on the ground. Closer to the earth, the effect of the field’s aroma intensified.

“I’ll eat later, but you can go ahead if you want.”

“No. I’m not hungry now.”

1

I shrugged off my backpack and placed it nearby, then let my back fall onto the ground. I lay on my

back in a sea of white flowers.

I heard Angel sit down a couple of meters from me and closed my eyes. I wasn't really tired, but the atmosphere was perfect, and not taking time to relax would be a waste. I felt my mouth's muscles tense involuntarily, and let out a lazy yawn as my eyes moistened a bit. I shouldn't have let myself be carried away by the sensations… In any case, resisting was futile. Second by second, my eyelids grew heavier, my breathing became more peaceful, and before I knew it, I fell asleep to the sound of rustling plants.

. . .

"Ugh…"

As soon as consciousness returned, I propped myself up on one hand and opened my eyes,

yawning again. The sun had traveled a good distance, and it wouldn’t be long before the first orange hues appeared on the horizon.

“Shit. We lost too much time. Angel…”

I looked around for my young companion while rubbing my eyes, but she wasn’t nearby.

“Angel…?”

I stood, stretching my legs, and everything made sense. A few meters away, I found Angelique. She was lying on the ground asleep, with a beautiful expression of peace on her face, hidden by the flowers. I wondered if she even noticed she must have lost sight of me when she lay down.

“Angel, wake up. Who knows how many hours we’ve been sleeping.”

I was about to shake her by the shoulders, but my hands stopped before touching her. Surrounded by that perfect white with such a serene expression… she looked so pure and delicate that I didn’t want to shake her too much. Instead, I placed my right hand on her head and played a little with her hair. The black strands falling over her cheek contrasted with the pale blossoms, but even that looked beautiful.

I tried to make my voice sound as calm as possible as I leaned closer to her.

“Angelique, we have to continue.”

A barely audible whimper escaped her lips as her brows arched slightly forward. Perhaps she was dreaming something pleasant, because upon waking

and opening her eyes, she stared into nothingness for a moment, as if recalling the last thing she saw before lifting her eyelids. It didn't take her long to notice my hand on her head, and though she seemed mildly intrigued by it, she chose to ignore it and, without much fuss, lifted herself off the ground and dusted off her clothes.

"Judging by the sunlight, we must have slept for five or even six hours. We'll find the house I mentioned and spend the night there."

"No."

"Hm? No what?"

"I didn't sleep that long."

Understanding each other would have been much easier if she didn’t have the habit of speaking in sentences of no more than five words.

“So… did you stay silently waiting for me to wake up?”

Angelique looked me in the eye and nodded curtly. Her gaze didn’t show annoyance or displeasure, but I still felt a bit guilty for making her wait so long.

“How patient…”

I murmured those words, picking up my rifle and backpack. I should emphasize that I knew there wouldn’t be any problems later even if I left my rifle exposed in such a windy, dusty environment; the ACE 52 has a perfectly sealed firing system that

prevents any dirt from entering. Convenient for the occasion.

“Let’s make the most of the remaining daylight.”

I didn’t wait for Angelique’s response and started walking. The breeze was blowing more insistently now, almost constantly, no longer as soothing as it had been hours ago. After a few minutes of walking, the temperature began to drop. The air brushing my neck grew colder.

“Angelique, if you feel cold, put on your cloak.”

Angelique’s steps halted, and mine followed. I turned slightly to look at her and waited patiently as she opened her backpack. Hers was noticeably smaller than mine, used to carry her personal items. A few pieces of clothing and not much else. But it

was a sturdy accessory that helped lighten my own load.

The cloak Angelique wore was just a large piece of gray fabric sewn at the top to form a loose hood, fastening with a clasp at the collarbone. It wasn't ideal for this situation, but it was what we had. I made it myself. A woman taught me to sew in Amere, before that, I had never touched a needle.

"Ready."

I nodded once at her statement and continued walking, this time with Angelique by my side. With the hood covering her head and the fabric hiding most of her body, she looked like something out of a medieval fantasy tale, or so I thought as I glanced at her cloak billowing over the white flowers.

"Alez."

“What?”

“About these flowers…”

“Yes?”

“I have a question.”

“And what is it?”

“…”

Silence fell between us for several seconds. Only the wind and the occasional distant bird song adorned the environment. After pondering her

question, Angelique raised her voice slightly without taking her eyes off the path ahead.

“What kind of flowers are these?”

My knowledge of gardening was—and still is—limited, to say the least. I knew a few names of very common plants, but it had never been a topic of much interest to me. However, I didn’t feel right showing my ignorance then. Not because I wanted to appear knowledgeable to the young girl accompanying me, but because it was such a rare event for Angelique to initiate a conversation, and I didn’t want to cut it short so soon.

“I think… I think they’re carnations.”

“Carnations?”

Angelique looked up at me, her eyes filled with a curiosity that was unusual for her. In hindsight, it's no wonder Angel is so beautiful today, considering she was such a lovely girl back then.

"Yes, carnations. Look at that white color, they must be carnations."

"I see… carnations…"

After murmuring the name of the flowers—or rather, the name I believed belonged to those flowers—she returned her gaze forward in silence.

"Do you like flowers, Angelique?"

"Yes."

“But you don’t know much about them.”

“…”

“Angelique?”

“I think I know a few things.”

“Oh… you mean, things you remember from a long time ago?”

“I don not know. I don’t remember ever reading about them, but still… I feel like I could recognize several species without thinking too much.”

“I see.”

‘Maybe there are things that, one way or another, people can’t erase from their memories,’ I thought. It wasn’t much, but it made me feel good to know that even Angelique had something she enjoyed. And I would certainly keep that in mind for later.

I didn’t notice exactly when, but at some point, the wind started gaining a lot more strength. It was no longer as pleasant as before and began to be genuinely bothersome. Yes, the sun was warm, but the wind still chilled my face. I remember the birds had also stopped singing—maybe they sought refuge when the weather turned worse? I had no idea.

My companion and I didn’t slow our pace or stop to wait for the wind to subside. We both knew it was always better to end up exhausted but sleeping under a roof than resting out in the open at the mercy of nature. Minutes passed, and the sky began to take on that orange hue that has enchanted melancholic souls for millennia; not me. In my situation, seeing the sky that color without yet having found shelter only meant I had to hurry.

“This field seems endless…”

“…”

“Besides the birds from earlier, I haven’t seen or heard any other animals. Not even rabbits or hares.”

“…”

“In the worst case, we’ll sleep out here, find the __”

“Alez.”

“Hm? Why are you stopping?”

Angelique had interrupted my speech—something already very unusual—and had stopped walking. The frail teenager stood still, staring ahead as if paying attention to something. I followed her gaze but found nothing—only flowers, flowers, and more flowers in that direction. The blooms disappeared from view only when the sloping terrain rose enough, which happened about a hundred meters ahead.

“I think… I heard something.”

“Something? Explain.”

“Voices.”

“…”

A voice could only mean a person, and in our circumstances, every person we encountered was almost certainly a hostile target. I gripped my rifle's handle tightly and, without thinking twice, switched off the safety, then turned to look at Angel again, speaking in a nearly whispering tone.

"Angelique, are you sure you heard a voice?"

"Yes."

"How sure?"

"Very sure."

Short words and a concise message, I had no reason to doubt what she said. It wasn't unusual for her to have heard something that slipped under my radar, given that, unlike Angelique, my hearing was

already damaged by years of listening to gunpowder deflagrating inches from my ears.

“And those voices came from the path we’re on now, right?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t let your guard down and alert me to any movement around us or any other voices you hear.”

The young girl just nodded once and walked behind me at my pace as I took the initiative to continue crossing the field.

“Angelique.”

“…”

“I want you to remove the safety from your pistol.”

“But… Alez, I—”

“I know, you’ve barely had a chance to practice, but it’s better to shoot at least by instinct than to end up dead without firing a single bullet.”

“Understood… yes.”

Angel followed my order immediately. She reached inside her cloak and pulled out the weapon she had hidden in the back of her shorts, secured by her belt since we hadn’t found a holster for it yet. I heard the metallic click as the safety was turned off, and I looked at the pistol she held with both hands.

Steyr M9. Angelique had only fired it once before for practice. Because of this, she wasn't at all used to handling the weight of a full magazine, so she only had six bullets ready to fire.

With extreme caution and a slow pace, we continued up the small hill; the iron sight of my ACE was already at the level of my right eye, and the index finger of my right hand was just millimeters from the trigger. If anything other than Angelique entered my line of sight, I was more than ready to eliminate it in an instant.

"Do you hear anything else?"

"No."

Both the angel accompanying me and I kept our voices very low and walked at a very slow pace.

Occasionally, I glanced in Angelique’s direction to make sure she stayed close to me. Her hands gripped the pistol tightly, and her fingers trembled slightly. Poor thing, she must have been terrified. Her face barely expressed a faint discomfort, but the rest of her body, slightly hunched and with a nervous look, spoke for itself.

Eventually, we began to rise more and more on the white hill, and after fifty or sixty meters, we finally saw traces of civilization.

No more than twenty meters away was what we had been searching for hours: the house of whoever once owned all this field. It was a building with a sturdy appearance. The white paint was chipped and faded, but the tiles protecting the two floors of the building looked in good condition. A main wing and next to it, a large shed that served as a garage for a tractor and a heap of scrap metal that was once a car.

“We’re at the back of the house, maybe they used this as a patio.”

“Why?”

“Why do I think that? Look.”

With my rifle, I pointed out several points of interest to Angelique.

“A stone table. Those look like remains of a clay oven and… over there are various things piled up, that doesn’t belong in a patio, probably looters. Barrels, electronic waste, ruined furniture… and other things. Whoever you heard seems to be getting rid of things they don’t want inside the house.”

We didn’t stop moving. While I explained what each thing I saw meant, we passed by the pile of

junk without paying it much attention, as at that moment, we had to focus mainly on the windows to gather information. We didn't know how many there were or how they were armed, so we had to be very careful. But… how careful can one be? I myself have ambushed men who seemed hundreds of times more cautious than me. Yes, you can never be completely sure.

Just five meters from the back door of the house, we stopped to memorize the position of the windows. There was a wooden door that seemed sturdy, and the wall was filled with white-framed windows every two meters on both floors.

I placed a hand on Angelique's shoulder to get her attention and then pointed with a finger to my right ear, to which she responded by shaking her head once; that meant she hadn't heard anything suspicious again. I let out a silent sigh and resumed my grip on my rifle. My intention was to start an invasion of the house to eliminate the hostiles by surprise, but just as I was preparing to run and kick the door open, I heard the characteristic sound of

glass breaking coming from one of the windows on the second floor. The muscles in my arms tensed, and I couldn't help but raise my voice, which had been a whisper until then, to a shout.

"Raise your weapon and search the windows!"

I gave that order and proceeded to obey it. I raised my Galil and it didn't take me long to pinpoint the exact broken window, but although I aimed in that direction, there was no target to shoot at.

"Nothing, maybe…".

It happened too quickly for me to react. I only remember hearing heavy objects being moved aside and then the now-so-familiar sound of a rifle being wielded a few meters behind me. A man emerged from the pile of junk, shouting in English.

“*Move an inch and you’re a dead man!*”

‘Move and I’ll shoot,’ a clear threat to which I could do little. There’s no worse situation out there than being ambushed from behind.

“Alez! What-?”

“Don’t move. Drop your weapon and put your hands on your neck. I’ll think of something.”

Looking at me with a noticeably worried expression, Angelique hesitated for a moment and then dropped her M9. The pistol fell hidden among the white flowers, and the girl placed both hands behind her head.

‘Her weapon is lost,’ was my first thought. Finding it again among the vegetation would take several seconds we didn’t have. The white field ended one or two meters ahead, if only we had walked a bit further before stopping, perhaps everything would have been easier.

“*Follow the girl’s lead, Frenchie. Drop your weapon!*”

‘Frenchie.’ He seemed to believe I was French because that was the language I spoke to Angelique in. The guy pressured me to drop my weapon, and I was sure he wouldn’t give me more time. I had no choice. I slowly removed the strap of my Galil and let it fall to the side. I wasn’t completely defeated yet, as I had my Beretta hidden under my clothes.

Like Angelique, I placed both hands on my neck. I glanced at her and, taking advantage of the language barrier, tried to calm her down without the attacker understanding what I was saying.

“Don’t get upset, control your breathing. I have a plan, I just need to know exactly which window the other guy is in to carry it out without fail. This time… I need your help, Angelique. You—”

“*Shut your mouth! Do you think this is a fucking joke?!*”

“You have to pay attention to me, ignore the guy behind us.”

I tried to keep my voice as low as possible while speaking at great speed, the nerves of the situation causing me to start getting impatient.

Hidden on my right side, concealed from view thanks to my coat, were two devices that could get me out of this predicament: a stun grenade and a smoke grenade. With the second one, I could

conceal our presence to relocate and eliminate the hostiles with my pistol, but that would be impossible without first stunning them since the smoke would take a few seconds to cover both Angelique and me.

“Listen carefully: when you hear the pin of the grenade being pulled, close your eyes tightly and cover your ears. After the noise, you can open your eyes and then throw yourself to the ground to grab your pistol.”

“*I told you to shut the fuck up!*”

He fired. The armed man fired a bullet at the wall five meters in front of me to intimidate me. It had no effect on me, of course, but Angelique flinched at the explosion.

As I glanced sideways at the windows searching for our lone enemy’s companion, the latter started

approaching very slowly, moving some objects that I couldn’t see but could hear. Time was running out. By the time he got close enough to restrain me, my plan would have failed. I swallowed saliva in a vain attempt to get rid of the horrible dry sensation in my mouth and took a breath. Where the hell was he? There weren’t so many windows in the house, and only one was broken. I refused to believe that he had left his companion alone just to deal with both of us; that would have been a very reckless move.

There might have been about four meters between the pile of trash from which the loud guy emerged and us; it wouldn’t take him too long to reach me even if he walked very slowly. And the second one was nowhere to be found. He simply wasn’t anywhere. I opened and closed my right hand, still held against my neck, preparing to trigger the stun grenade when the first enemy got too close. Twenty or thirty seconds, it wouldn’t take longer than that to arrive. The wind blew and blew, and my eyes went from one side to the other. I couldn’t let myself be killed there, but I didn’t have the upper hand either. And even though I had experienced

similar situations countless times, it was different now that Angelique depended on my decisions.

“Alez…”

Angelique spoke, preventing me from making a hasty decision. My heart, which had been beating as fast as a mouse’s until then, slowed down instantly —or at least that’s what I felt.

“I hear something… behind the door.”

The second enemy.

Three seconds after Angel’s words, the sturdy door opened with an annoying creak, and the other hostile emerged from inside. He wore a balaclava and carried a shotgun; I remember the model was a Remington 870. If he shot us with something like

that at this distance, he would turn us into mincemeat. This second enemy was less cautious than the first, and that was all I needed.

It was risky. It was terribly risky, and maybe I could have made a better choice.

The shotgun-wielding man hurried to approach us and said something to his comrade, which I don’t remember because at that moment I was fully focused on the movements of the terrible 12 gauge in his hands.

As slowly as a human could, I moved my right hand away from my neck and proceeded to slide it stealthily down my neck. I had to bring it to the back of my hip to take the first grenade, but I couldn’t let either of the two men notice my movements. I started sweating. The guy behind us replied something to the balaclava-wearing one, and he replied. They seemed to be arguing. I remember something about what to do with us. If my memory

serves me right, the one with the shotgun wanted to get rid of me and keep Angelique, while the other wanted to keep me alive.

I swallowed saliva again and glanced at Angelique out of the corner of my eye, still moving my hand. Poor thing was terrified. Her expression was worried, although not too much, but there was a drop of sweat falling down her cheek, and her two hands were shaking.

The argument heated up, and the guy behind raised his voice as he said something about keeping me as food; by this point, my hand was already moving down my chest.

Do you know that feeling when your pulse is so high that you can feel the artery in your neck throbbing? Well, that’s what I was going through at that moment. The seconds were eternal, and every centimeter I moved my hand seemed to take an hour.

The guy with the balaclava didn’t have his finger on the trigger and wasn’t aiming at us either, giving us some time to attack him, but we didn’t know the first one’s position. Maybe he was aiming at us ready to pull the trigger, or maybe he had already lowered his weapon; we couldn’t tell.

My hand was already going down my abdomen; just a few more seconds, and we should start my plan. What if it failed? What if the guy with the 12-gauge blew my head off even before I threw the second grenade? Doubts began to assail me; suddenly, my idea didn’t seem so good anymore, and the fear of being killed right there took hold of my body. But… it was already too late to regret. I already had the stun grenade in my hand.

I closed my eyes tightly, discreetly took all the air I could, and pulled the pin. The metallic noise caught the attention of the three people around me. Angelique was very quick to cover her ears, but the other two could only look in my direction as I threw the grenade from my waist towards them.

A stun grenade has a detonation time of 1.5 seconds; I didn't have the chance to cover my ears, but the two hostiles didn't even react.

The grenade detonated, and suddenly all I could hear was a horrible ringing that completely disabled my hearing.

"*What…?!*"

"Angelique, now!"

I took the second grenade, unable to know if Angelique had responded to me or not, removed the pin, and threw it right in the face of the rifle-wielding enemy—which I only then saw corresponded to an AK-. Even if I could act after the stun grenade exploded, it was purely out of

adrenaline. My ears were blocked, and my sense of balance was out of control.

The smoke from the second grenade began to invade the space around us, and I threw my whole body over the shotgun guy. I had to finish him off; a single shot at that distance could kill both Angelique and me. The man was completely disoriented and confused, so I was able to throw him to the ground without problems and grab his weapon, crushing his hand on the grip with my right knee. The next thing I did was hit him with both hands in the face to cause more confusion if possible and make him drop his weapon, but the guy was tough and resisted. The smoke was no longer ignorable and made it difficult to see, even being so close to my enemy.

I didn’t know what Angelique was doing; I could only trust that she had followed my instructions and had taken her weapon. I, for my part, had to focus on my objective, battling with the smoke and my inability to hear anything.

After another blow to the face, the man beneath me let go of the shotgun but not to surrender, instead returning a punch to my side, all while opening his eyes. The unexpected blow deprived me of oxygen for a second. My enemy had already regained his vision, and I was still recovering from the ringing in my ears. I endured the pain in my side and delivered a blow to his left cheek, then another to the right followed by another to the left; my aim was to overwhelm him with the same attack until he lost consciousness, but he was truly a tough guy. He grabbed my throat with one hand and threw me aside, then got on top of me, pressing my chest with his left knee. Amidst the smoke, it was nearly impossible to see beyond my own hand, which is why I believe he didn't try to retrieve the shotgun.

My ears gradually began to recover, and I could hear the breathing coming from behind the balaclava.

I threw another punch towards his face, but this time he was agile enough to evade it without getting off me, and then he pressed my neck against the

ground using his left hand. On pure instinct, I managed to grab his arm with both hands to try to remove his hand, but he was putting all the weight of his body into that grip. I heard a blade being unsheathed nearby, and my eyes widened in surprise; there was a knife in his right hand. He raised his forearm about thirty centimeters and then forcefully lowered the tip of the knife towards my chest. I was quick and stopped the attack by holding his wrist with my left hand, but I couldn't hold on like that for long. The grip on my throat was slowly depriving me of air, and my arm was losing strength; the knife was coming down. The blade was just a hand's distance from my body; a momentary distraction meant death. However, it was a moment like this that I was waiting for.

He had both hands busy attacking me, while only one of mine was dealing with stopping the knife. I quickly lowered my right hand and took my Beretta from the back of my coat, hidden in the holster sewn to the fabric. In less than a third of a second, I released the safety and placed the barrel against my assailant's abdomen, as it was the most vulnerable part of his body from my position. I fired twice, and

the force in his arm diminished instantly as the man fell to the side.

The noise of the shots worked to uncover my ears and bring me back to reality. I quickly grabbed my enemy's hand holding the knife to use his arm as a guide and brought my pistol to his head. I fired two more times. He was dead.

It was then, having momentarily freed myself from danger, that I paid attention to what was happening around me. The wind wasn't blowing as strongly as before, but it still blew; the smoke would dissipate in a few seconds. Moans and shouts reached my ears; Angelique was fighting with the other hostile.

"Angelique! Shoot!"

Why wasn’t she using her weapon? Had she been unable to find it? The smoke still prevented me from seeing, and anxiety consumed me.

I was there, lying among the flowers, watching the smoke while I heard Angelique letting out painful groans as the man yelled words that I can’t remember. I thought about shooting in the direction of the male voice, but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t pull the trigger as long as there was a chance of harming Angel. Seconds passed, and the struggle didn’t stop, until suddenly both voices ceased and were replaced by gunfire. Five bullets were fired rapidly one after another.

“Angelique!!”

Nothing. There was no response. A lump formed in my throat, and I raised my Beretta towards the last noise I could perceive.

Two seconds, four seconds, six seconds. Nothing. There was no noise.

“Angelique, you must respond, or I’ll open fire!”

I didn’t want to believe it. I needed to hear her voice. Even if it meant being killed, I couldn’t shoot if I wasn’t sure Angelique was out of my sight.

The wind blew again. This time it was powerful, bringing so much force and lasting so many seconds that it began to dissipate all the remaining smoke from the grenade. I tightened my grip and prepared to see the worst; to shoot if necessary.

Then, with a corpse with a blown skull next to me and several orange rays illuminating the metal of my pistol, I witnessed what is probably the scene that has been most vividly engraved in my retina in my entire life.

“Angelique…”

She stood there, about four meters from my position. In her small hands was a smoking barrel, and at her feet, a corpse. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, and her gaze was fixed on the body in front of her. Her hair was disheveled, and blood ran down her cheek. The clothes around her chest were soaked in blood, as was her left forearm. At some point during the struggle, the clasp of her cape had come undone, letting the fabric fall to one side, which was now being dragged by the wind. Her expression was blank, and her lips were trembling. The last bit of smoke was blown away by the will of Aeolus and the rays of Apollo, which were not yet entirely tinged by the sunset, illuminated the girl and her surroundings. With this change in atmosphere, she lowered her hands a bit and slowly raised her head to look at the sky. The current made her hair sway, and the sun highlighted her eyes as if they were two jewels.

At that moment, Angelique, surrounded by white and red flowers under a faint orange hue, was the most beautiful person on Earth, and only I was there to appreciate her.

. . .

We spent several minutes without moving until everything around us was bathed in an intense orange tone.

“…”

I stood up, shaking my clothes, and went to fetch Angelique’s cape along with the clasp, then stood by her side, hiding her in my shadow. At this, she seemed to come to her senses and turned her body to face me. Gently, I took the pistol from her hands, secured it, and placed it in my pocket.

“… You did very well, Angel.”

Of course, she didn’t respond. I put the cape around her neck and secured it with the clasp. Angelique lowered her gaze as if she were thinking about hundreds of things, and I, perhaps still not fully aware of what I was doing, took her cheek in my hand and wiped the blood from her skin with my thumb.

“You really… you really did very well. Let’s go inside, you need to rest.”

I turned my back and went to retrieve my rifle, but I didn’t hear her footsteps following me, so I decided to turn around. Angelique couldn’t take her eyes off the corpse at her feet. She had killed. For the first time, she had ended someone else’s life, and perhaps she was processing it. Just… just remembering that moment hurts me. Angelique’s hands had become dirty, and it was my fault.

“Angelique.”

The young girl lifted her head and looked in my direction. I could tell that her eyes were watery, but she blinked a couple of times and erased any trace of a possible tear.

“Alez.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t think… I don’t think I will be able to sleep well tonight.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll stay awake nearby until you can fall asleep. How does that sound?”

There was no vocal response; the girl simply nodded very weakly and walked towards me.

. . .

That night, Angelique struggled to fall asleep, but I… I couldn’t even close my eyes.

Chapter Three: Zara and David
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January 10th, 2031

Where do I begin…? Alez Braviel, born on February 17th, 2000. Austrian. My parents aren't relevant to this story, just a loving office worker and a housewife who paid for my education in hopes that I would become someone. But I had different ideas. Well… they weren't exactly ideas, more like my mediocrity kept me from excelling in my studies, and I always barely passed. Yes, I'm not very smart.

What was left for me after finishing high school, then? That's right, I enlisted in the army purely for the paycheck. The epitome of mediocrity, as you can see. Nothing went as expected. There are always

completely unpredictable factors that end up altering everything without us being able to do anything about it. It's… frustrating in a way. After all, who could have foreseen such a bloody war?

The training lasted two years, from 2018 to 2020. Right after that, the war broke out. This happened on a… I think I remember… no, I don't recall exactly. I only know it was in April. Even today, I can't be sure if the insurgents just took advantage of the situation or if they were the real cause. It doesn't matter, does it? Even if I had been more aware of what was happening… nothing would have been different.

. . .

April, 2020

"Alez, you awake?"

Lost in my thoughts, as usual. My gaze was buried in the bland cup of tea before me, and the dark circles under my eyes signaled that I had no intention of paying attention to my surroundings. The voice calling me repeated itself a couple more times, but my lethargy was so immense that I simply tried to pretend I hadn't heard it until it became too annoying to ignore.

"Yes, I'm awake."

"Then pay attention to the news, it's terrifying."

That was David, one of my squadmates, sitting right across from me on the long plank serving as a table for about ten others. Like me, he was an assault role player and… a lively person, to put it mildly. Don't get me wrong, I really appreciated David; he was one of my only two friends in the force. With his orange hair and facial features that would have suited a model more than a soldier, David Vann

Floors enjoyed great popularity throughout the military for his good nature and charisma. The bastard had it easy.

“More riots?”

I let out that question while glancing at the screen across the mess hall. It was impossible to hear what the slightly agitated reporter was saying due to everyone chatting during their routine breakfast, so I could only try to discern what was happening based on the images. ‘Seven dead and fourteen injured in the latest protest’ read the screen.

“Yes, and I doubt they’ll stop anytime soon.”

“I can’t recall why they started, to be honest.”

“No one’s very sure, Alez. I think it all began with some protest in… Spain, I think. Wasn’t there a corruption scandal or something?”

“And what the hell do we have to do with that?”

“That’s the issue! The protests spread across various countries in an apparent universal demand for greater government transparency, but in most nations, that demand didn’t seem very strong.”

“So?”

“An excuse, my young Alez.”

“We’re almost the same age. What do you mean by an excuse?”

“I read this online a few days ago: many theorize that all the listed reasons are just excuses to mobilize as many people as possible.”

“Is the idea to destabilize the government?”

“Perhaps.”

The horn announcing the end of breakfast time sounded, interrupting our conversation for a few seconds. I used the pause to gulp down my entire cup in one go.

“Any idea who’s behind it all? Assuming such a conspiracy theory is true, of course.”

“No, no clue.”

“Figured as much.”

Though we treated the topic with due seriousness, neither of us gave real credit to such stories. I mean, anyone can go on an anonymous forum and spin a tale convincing enough for people to believe it, but we, as soldiers, couldn’t assume something like that could be real. In a matter of such gravity, surely we’d be informed before anyone else. Or so we thought. The days passed, and, like the nagging back pain we all decided to ignore until it leaves us paralyzed, the scandals and riots became increasingly common without anyone making a real effort to find any hidden plot behind the growing chaos in half of Europe.

…

“The death toll has surpassed a hundred, hasn’t it?”

The shooting range. It was our platoon's turn to use it for practice, but with everyone so focused on the evolving conflict, few stepped away from their conversations to pick up a weapon. Even First Sergeant Kyd, our platoon leader, was sharing his opinions with everyone without noting those skipping training. The sun wasn't too warm, occasionally hidden by clouds.

"The violence escalated too quickly. Is it right to still consider them mere protests?" 'I don't know, and I also don't understand why the government hasn't addressed it.' "Maybe they're trying to make it seem less terrible." "I doubt it. I really think they're as clueless as we are."

Ideas flew back and forth so dynamically that it was hard to keep track of who said what. I was silent, lacking both information and interest. Had I known the real importance of it all… no, I probably wouldn't have said anything even if I'd known how much my life would change once the war started. I glanced around the range, trying to count all the

platoon members, and noticed some were missing while only one person held a rifle.

“Typical…”

I murmured and then distanced myself from the men and their rushed conclusions, walking slowly and silently toward the other person I considered a friend.

“…”

A shot. A shell hitting the ground. Six seconds of distant chatter. Another shot. That was Zara. The sniper of our platoon was the closest thing I’d ever seen to a beast in human form. I always thought it was some enchantment that made me addicted to watching her meticulously fire her SSG 69. From the first time I saw her unfold the bipod, press the stock against her shoulder, and tighten her lips while

squinting, I was hooked on watching her shoot. “Beautiful” is a fitting word, but “wild” describes it better. Let me explain: If Angelique is a machine entering combat to eliminate her target quickly, regardless of resources spent, Zaralyne Heart was an efficient animal striking the weak spot of her prey, taking it down with one shot even if it meant taking all the time in the world. Each time the trigger was pulled and the weapon recoiled, the loose strands of her dark blue-black hair swayed violently, her arms releasing tension only to regain it just before the next shot.

“Aren’t you going to take a break? You’ve been shooting since we arrived.”

“Huh?”

My voice seemed to break her concentration because the murderous aura she emitted moments ago vanished as quickly as she removed her finger from the trigger guard.

“Alez. Wait, why do you say it like I’m doing something wrong? The shooting range is the only thing keeping your shooting skills from rusting.”

“I’m not reproaching you for using the time well. I’m just curious if you’re even slightly interested in the battles between police and protesters.”

“Oh, that… of course, I am, like anyone, but I don’t see the point in guessing what’s happening from the comfort of the base. We’re the army, aren’t we? We should be more involved to know what’s really going on.”

Always so practical.

“Do you think the time will come when we have to go out and hunt terrorists?”

“I don’t know, Alez. I don’t think you used that word wrongly, but I see it as a distant moment when we’re ordered to shoot our own citizens.”

“Over a hundred dead already; it doesn’t seem so illogical to me.”

I took a seat on a nearby bench and patted the space beside me, inviting her to join. She seemed hesitant, making a doubtful gesture, but after checking the small ammunition box by her rifle, she sighed and walked over to sit next to me.

“I don’t want my first real combat to be against protesters armed with sticks and stones, Alez. That’s not why I train so hard.”

“Would you feel the same if they were better armed?”

“As I said, they’re still citizens. They’re still neighbors, right? I wouldn’t feel good about shooting them.”

“Then why train here if not to keep the peace, Zara?”

“To protect the country. Isn’t that what we’re all here for in the end?”

“I understand, and those protesters are still part of the people, even if they’re violent.”

“Exactly. It’s not that simple.”

Determination was something she never lacked. She was stubborn, and quite so. I always assumed she must have been raised that way, in the countryside. Zara lost her parents when she was a

child, and since then, her grandfather took care of her. According to her, it was he who taught her how to shoot.

“You don’t seem to think the same, Alez.”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you interested in defending the nation as you’re supposed to?”

I remember that question caught me off guard. Just as I chose to look at the sky to ponder a response, the sun peeked out from behind the clouds and blinded me for a moment, so I lowered my gaze to the ground again. There, I found a dozen men in green uniforms arguing heatedly, searching for possible answers to the question concerning those later recognized as the terrorists of Amere. Each and every one of those men once swore to give their

lives for the country, and of course, I had too, but unlike them, I was never very sure about it.

“The truth is… I wouldn’t know how to answer that.”

“Hehe, I expected that response.”

The skilled shooter placed a hand on my head and tried unsuccessfully to ruffle my then very short hair.

“Don’t overthink it, young Alez. If you’re still here with us after two years since you enlisted voluntarily, there’s something keeping you tied.”

And she was only two years older than me.

Zara and David always treated me like the youngster who needed to be protected and trained. A model who captivated with his looks and a strange farm girl with excellent shooting skills. Terrible mentors.

“Maybe it’s the paycheck.”

“No one would stay to suffer here just for the money, Alez.”

“Really…?”

I saw Zara’s thin lips begin to form a small smile, and before she could respond, I heard the voice of Moser, the sergeant who assisted Kyd, ordering us to return to training immediately.

. . .

We had no idea, but the war had already begun by then. Entire towns on the outskirts of France, Spain, and Italy had been captured and were under the control of the same multinational group that planned to change the world. There were already clandestine weapons caches in Germany, Austria, and Poland that would later be used to supply combatants in the bloody urban skirmishes that would begin occurring across the continent a few months later. The politicians, as cowardly and opportunistic as ever, had their own escape and security plans. Unlike the ignorant masses, they were well aware of what awaited the country but prioritized safeguarding their own lives over warning the people who paid their salaries.

The high command of the armed forces already knew the danger, but there was no way to act without drawing attention, and drawing attention would undoubtedly lead to panic. Their hands were tied. With the pieces in place, the next part is quite predictable. In June of that same year, we found ourselves traveling from our base in the third infantry brigade towards the west, to support the

twelfth infantry unit in their fight against the terrorists uprising in Linz. It was a disaster.

“It’s so hot.”

“We’re heading into summer, it’s to be expected.”

The entire platoon was aboard a CH-47 Chinook. We weren’t alone; two more platoons accompanied us. Kyd and Moser were up front doing paperwork, but the rest of us were together, looking at each other with anticipation and fear for what awaited us. From Zara talking calmly, trying to ease her spotter Magiera’s nerves, to medic Allen meditating silently, and the recon duo, Helek and Nidda, making a rough count of the armed forces’ casualties so far.

“Yeah…”

“Are you scared, Alez?”

“I’m not sure if it’s fear I feel, but I can’t stay calm.”

“Care to explain it better?”

I stopped looking at the serene landscape outside the helicopter window and turned to David. He looked somewhat like an older brother trying to understand his little sibling’s problems on their first days of school.

“What do you want me to explain?”

“Are you afraid of combat, Alez?”

“It’s not that I have a greater fear of dying than anyone else, it’s just…”

“Just?”

“Have you ever killed anyone before, David?”

“No, of course not.”

“And do you think you’ll be able to raise your rifle to kill strangers as soon as we get off this aircraft?”

“That’s what we’ve been training for. We’re facing people causing severe harm to the nation and who’ve taken many lives. Hesitating will only make us the ones who get killed.”

“I suppose so…”

I somehow sensed the Chinook’s speed decreasing as I looked out the window again, and a voice came through the speakers on the metal walls covered with equipment and weapons.

“**Descent in five minutes. All personnel prepare for deployment.**”

“Attention.”

The next to speak was First Sergeant Kyd. The man was experienced. He always had a stern expression, and every word and movement he made was covered by an air of elegance that made him look deserving of his position. His broad chin emphasized his masculine voice, and his constant look of readiness was enviable.

“The combat zone covers the entire northern part of Linz. And by north, I mean everything above the Danube. It’s an area of about twenty-three square kilometers, and no sector is under army control.”

“So the entire region has been taken?”

“That’s correct. The residents have likely been taken as prisoners and will be used as shields and bargaining chips, so we are not authorized to use heavy vehicles or any kind of artillery.”

“All residents taken as prisoners? How many are we talking about, sir?”

“We don’t even have an estimate, but the police force was easily overwhelmed, so expect heavy resistance.”

That knot I had only felt before during school exams or when lying to my parents grew in my stomach, but this time it was gigantic and heavy, making me nauseous.

“We will be descending on a route to the west. Reports indicate no hostiles present in the landing zone, but there’s no doubt we’ll attract attention upon arrival. The first order after landing is to quickly find cover in nearby buildings and neutralize or eliminate any hostile elements.”

“**Landing in one minute.**”

“Everyone up.”

With our weapons loaded and ready for combat, we watched as the gate slowly opened when we were already ten meters above the ground.

“This will be your first time in combat, platoon. Put these years of training into practice, and everything will go well. Trust your comrades and don’t act rashly.”

And so came my baptism by fire. In a city I had never set foot in before, facing people born on the same soil as me.

I’ll be honest, I don’t remember much of what happened then. This was… ten years ago. Yes, ten years ago from when I’m writing this. I vaguely remember descending from the helicopter and following my comrades to the nearest building to establish a basic defense. The sound of gunfire erupted almost immediately, and although I couldn’t see exactly where it started, I did catch sight of a medic from the last platoon to descend getting hit in the neck by a bullet. I will never be able to erase that scene from my memory. The boy, who seemed to be my age, fell to the ground clutching his throat and was quickly dragged to the side by his companions, but it was too late. I later learned that he died right there, drowning in his own blood.

. . .

My standard-issue weapon was the AUG A3, loaded with 5.56x45mm ammunition and equipped with a reflex sight. The battle had started about an hour earlier, and we couldn’t move from our position until the other two platoons secured the surroundings. We had really chosen the worst possible position. ‘Take the city zoo’s parking lot’ was our first assigned objective.

“Number of hostiles?!”

“Nineteen confirmed, but there are definitely more!”

Four of us were taking cover behind a spacious security booth while the rest of my comrades were inside, with the radio operator communicating the

operation’s progress and Allen treating Mike, one of our own, who had been shot in the leg.

“Recon will stay here until we clear a safe route to the booth on the other side of the parking lot! Alez, Javier, David, and I will advance between the vehicles! Helek and Nidda will cover us!”

“Yes, sir!”

The shout was in unison.

“Heart, can you hear me in there?!”

“Loud and clear, sir!”

Both Zara and her spotter were inside the booth, which seemed to be the only relatively safe place around.

The long parking lot occupied an entire block, was completely barricaded, and was crammed with abandoned cars organized in two long columns, leaving a wide space in the center. We could barely hear Kyd's orders through the incessant gunfire that was chipping the paint off the building behind us.

"I want you and Magiera to take out the targets from inside the booth!"

"Understood, sir!"

There was no time to keep planning. If we were facing even a slightly intelligent enemy, it was only a matter of time before they decided to flank us. With this in mind, the first sergeant looked at each

of us once, pulled a smoke grenade from his tactical vest, and threw it right in front of the booth, creating a curtain that allowed us to split into two groups and run in opposite directions to hide behind different vehicles. By the time the smoke began to clear, my comrades had already opened fire on the hooded terrorists on the other side. And I say my comrades because fear had paralyzed my right hand, and although I forced myself to lift the rifle and aim, I couldn't bring myself to fire a single shot.

"Alez, what the hell is wrong with you?!"

The one yelling in my face was David. He had just taken a few lives seconds earlier, and I couldn't understand how he managed to keep his mind clear. My reaction was typical of a coward, but David, with the same amount of training as me, already looked like a seasoned veteran.

"If you're going to be a hindrance, then run to the booth, but stop being dead weight!"

His words hurt. David had never treated me harshly before. But he was right; I was only embarrassing my instructors and hindering the entire operation. So, out of respect for my comrade and to ensure the completion of the primary objective, I shouted back after shaking my head vigorously and swallowing hard.

“I’m going to fight, David!”

“Then shoot!”

Without a second thought, I exposed part of my body from behind cover and pulled the trigger of my AUG. It was evident I wasn’t aiming directly at any target, just laying down suppressive fire over a group of enemies to keep them pinned down, but that seemed to be enough for David, for the moment.

The confrontation lasted a while, and I managed to be helpful without having to kill anyone. Most of the casualties were inflicted by David, Kyd, Zara, and Javier. The enemy's gunfire was decreasing, highlighting the fact that they were falling like flies, one by one. It's no wonder if you stop to think for just two seconds: ten well-trained soldiers with better weapons are more than enough to handle thirty unprotected terrorists carrying much less technologically advanced arms.

And here's why this particular part of the operation, that is, the clearing of the parking lot, is the only moment I remember with almost total clarity.

We were already taking more than half the ground, with about six hostiles still active. David and I advanced cautiously, jumping from vehicle to vehicle, while he handled the killing, and I provided suppression and cover.

“Just three more rows of cars, and we’ll have covered the entire parking lot. How are you on ammo, Alez?”

“One and a half mags left.”

“Same here. Should be enough.”

Gunshots from Zara echoed many meters behind us, along with Kyd’s orders to Javier.

“One more time: cover me while I move to the next car, and then I’ll return the favor.”

“Understood!”

It happened so fast. David darted out from cover at full speed, and I stood up to provide support. He took only two steps beyond our makeshift shelter before being struck in the right side by two bullets. Luckily, they were small-caliber and were stopped by his standard-issue Kevlar, though the force of the impacts knocked him to the ground.

"Da-!"

My heart jumped as I saw him fall. Mechanically, I turned in the direction from which the shots had come.

Time began to flow irregularly. From the moment I saw that man with an MP5K shift his focus from David to me, the seconds felt endless. He had long brown hair and only covered the lower half of his face with a black bandana. As soon as he saw my weapon aimed at him, his eyes widened, and he chose me as his priority target.

It was already too late for him. While he was just raising his submachine gun, I had already centered my red dot sight on his right eyebrow. It wasn't training. It wasn't at all the daily drills that made me fire; I'm sure it was simply the terror of being killed right there.

Bullet after bullet after bullet. Though one shot would have been enough, I couldn't help but empty the remaining rounds into his face. His death was so grotesque that I can perfectly recall how the first bullet cruelly shattered his skull, and the subsequent ones deformed his face until it was unrecognizable.

When he hit the asphalt, he was no longer a person but a body with half his head atomized, his gray matter splattered against the van behind him.

I stood there for a couple of seconds, silent and with my mouth half-open, watching the blood escape the corpse. My first kill, the first time I stopped another human being's heart.

Then I heard my name from David's voice, and then from Kyd's. And after that…

Nothing. I don't remember anything else about the operation in Linz. I don't know what we did next or how we reclaimed the city. Like an amnesiac, everything that happened that day is simply no longer in my head. I don't think it's because of the number of years that have passed, it's… I don't know, I don't know, and that's what saddens me the most.

. . .

Back on the Chinook. My entire platoon was safe, returning to base. In the helicopter, there was only silence in respect for the fallen medic, our sole casualty. No one spoke. I didn't know how many hours had passed or how I ended up with that red-stained bandage on my right arm.

Zara was beside me, sleeping with her head resting on my shoulder as I gazed out the window at the same landscape I had seen on the way there, but this time it was early morning. On the other side was David, staring at me while holding something on his abdomen that I can’t quite remember.

“Alez…”

“…”

He wanted to say something, but I respected the silence because my own thoughts were too chaotic to pay him any attention. The only sound I wanted to keep hearing was Zara’s gentle breathing, which managed to vaguely calm me.

“You did very well today, Alez.”

“…”

“Really… really well.”

I don’t know if he meant it or if he just wanted to encourage me, but I chose not to respond and kept looking out the window.

…

Today, I wish I had thanked him.

Chapter Four: Angelique III

+

Spring, 2031

“So you don’t know the answer.”

“It’s not about knowing or not, it’s—”

“We’ve been going in circles for the last ten minutes.”

“Of course, and that’s because—”

“Because you can’t accept that you can’t answer, Alez.”

“But—but it’s not just me; no one could answer that so easily.”

“And why not?”

“It’s hard to explain. Language isn’t perfect, Angel. And there are… things that—”

“Huh.”

“What? Why are you making that face?”

“Because you’re making excuses.”

I felt my right eyebrow twitch involuntarily, but I took a deep breath to hold back an insult. It’s

difficult sometimes to remember that Angelique isn't trying to provoke me; it's just her way.

"I'm not making excuses. And I could explain if you'd stop interrupting me so much."

"…"

"Fine. Let's start from the beginning. Could you repeat the question?"

"What comes first, the soul or the body?"

I let my half-smoked cigarette fall into the ashtray and sighed bitterly. I glanced up for a moment: the smoke I'd been exhaling for nearly an hour had already clouded the ceiling of the library. Yes, the library. Our absurdly excessive house, which could accommodate twenty people but

shelters only two, also has a library. And it’s not a… small library with two or three shelves. It’s a *library*, in every sense of the word. Two stories high, with the upper floor enjoying a considerably higher domed ceiling supported by a thick stone pillar in the center. Who on earth owned all of this?

“It’s complicated.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s no foundation to build on, that’s why. I could tell you the body comes first and explain why I think so, but neither of us would be satisfied with that answer.”

I’d die before I could count how many books are in that library. Shelves cover every wall, and pillars scattered throughout the place hold even more. It’s overwhelming; I can’t imagine why anyone would

build such a vast library with so many books that a lifetime wouldn't be enough to read them all.

The smoke drifted out through the upper windows, while Angelique's insistent gaze stabbed into my side. We sat next to each other at a desk pushed up against the wall, each in our own wooden chair, taking a break from my student's lessons. I tutor Angelique. There's no great mystery behind it; she's very young, and I don't like the idea of her not studying anything when she has the chance. I've learned a lot over the years, but even now I keep learning more and more with every lesson. After all, to teach her things… I have to learn them first.

"We need to tackle a few other questions before we can even begin to approach that one, Angelique."

"Yeah? Like what?"

“For starters, what do you understand by the word ‘soul’?”

“Nothing. I don’t know.”

“Try a little harder.”

“But I really don’t know.”

“I said, try a little harder.”

“Ugh…”

“…”

“The soul… it’s something like ‘what we really are,’ right?”

“Is that all?”

“Hm… the soul is what we truly are, and the place, the… ‘thing’ where our memories, feelings, and decisions are stored…”

“Your definition doesn’t make any sense.”

“I told you I didn’t know.”

The girl pouted slightly. I hadn’t meant to upset her, of course, but her definition of the soul was undeniably rough. I couldn’t blame her, though. In fact, I wondered what books she might have read to even form a definition on her own.

Oh, right. I started telling this story in the middle. This didn't happen too long ago. Maybe two months, or perhaps three. Angelique has grown so much… I wonder how old she is now. About three or four years ago, when I met her, she looked almost, almost like a child, but now… now she's a young woman, isn't she? I don't know. If I had to guess, I'd say she's sixteen, maybe seventeen… or around eighteen.

And…

Wait, let me try to express myself without sounding like a creep. Angelique has grown up. Her body now has curves, and the quiet monotony of our daily life makes it impossible to ignore the development of her figure. She's also, though not by much, a bit taller; I don't have to look down as much to talk to her. Her hair has grown longer, and her blue eyes don't seem as large as before, and her smile… that… that has changed a lot. Witnessing that lovely smile is still a relatively rare event, but

it’s becoming less so, and… each time it brings me more peace.

“See, the tricky part about defining the soul is that no one really knows what it is. The soul has been a topic of debate for millennia, across many civilizations.”

“How can they have been searching for the answer for so long and still not found it?”

“I guess that’s just how people are.”

“I guess…”

“Monopsychism holds that there’s only one superior soul above all others, and that the soul of each person is merely a manifestation, something like a replica, of this great soul.”

“Wouldn’t that mean we’re all the same person?”

“Hm… maybe. I don’t know. Perhaps souls aren’t what make us who we are.”

“Hm… well, that still doesn’t help me understand what a soul is.”

“You’re right. Well, according to the Bible, the soul is the ‘being,’ meaning it’s what defines the very existence of people and animals.”

“Animals have souls too?”

“They say so. There are also beliefs that don’t even acknowledge the existence of a soul, like Buddhism.”

“…”

“I think… I think it was Plato who said something like the soul is trapped within the body… I think. I could be wrong. Actually, I could be wrong about everything I’ve said.”

“Alez.”

“Yes?”

“You’re just confusing me more.”

“Oh, sorry… Okay, I’ll put it this way, trying to stick to the most common understanding of the soul that most people have. I can’t guarantee it’s correct, but here it goes: The soul is a part of your existence

that doesn’t manifest physically. It has no weight, no shape, and doesn’t occupy any space. However, it’s where the only thing that truly defines you as an entity resides. Not memories, not experiences, not feelings, just this… this… thing we call a soul. It alone is unique and unrepeatable.”

At some point during my little lecture, I had let my gaze drift toward the cigarette slowly burning in the ashtray, and once I finished speaking, I hurried to pick it up again, taking one last, long drag before dropping the butt. I turned my eyes back to the charming girl beside me, only to find her radiant blue eyes locked onto mine, as if she were still processing my ramblings.

“Too complicated?”

“No…”

“Too long?”

“No, not that either. Just…”

“Just…?”

A smile.

One that caught me by surprise. A small, calm smile, perhaps tinged with admiration, was forming on her lips.

I’m weak.

“You were surprisingly clear, Alez. It’s also obvious that you know quite a bit about the subject.”

“Not really… even if I know some terms and such, it’s just superficial knowledge. I’ve never studied philosophy, religion, or anything that complicated in depth.”

“So what have you studied in depth?”

“Nothing.”

“You didn’t go to school?”

“Of course I did, but you don’t study anything in depth there, Angel. You just skim through general knowledge on hundreds, hundreds of things. The idea is that with that foundation, you decide what to do with the rest of your life.”

“University?”

“Exactly.”

“You didn’t go to university?”

“No, I joined the army when I was very young. Then the war started, and… you can imagine the rest.”

“No… I can’t really imagine the rest.”

“You already know a good part of it.”

“Of what happened, yes. But not of you, Alez.”

“It’s not that interesting.”

“It is…”

“Hm?”

“It is to me.”

Her gaze was on me again. What a powerful look this girl has. Angelique is the kind of person who can wake you just by standing beside you, staring intently. It’s not quite terrifying because of how beautiful her face is, but it’s definitely unsettling.

By then, we’d already exceeded our break time, but neither of us was really in the mood to continue with the lesson, so the best thing we could do was keep talking. I took another cigarette from the pack on the desk and lit it with one of the matches beside it. Angelique did the same with another cigarette.

I don’t forbid her from smoking. The bullets we dodge week after week do more damage.

“The war started a few years after I joined the armed forces. My team was decimated by an Amere attack, and I ended up wandering alone across the continent. Happy?”

“No, not at all.”

“No?”

“I don’t want the summary! Tell me more.”

“If I say there’s nothing interesting, it’s because there isn’t, Angelique. Most of the story is just me wandering around. Looking for food, shelter, or sometimes weapons and ammunition.”

“I’m not talking about the war and what came after.”

“Then what?”

“Didn’t you make any friends in the army?”

“Friends? That’s what you’re more interested in?”

Taking the cigarette from her lips and nodding slowly, she exhaled a small cloud of smoke at the same time I did. The books didn’t matter anymore. Suddenly, she no longer wanted to know what Wilde or Bradbury had written. This smoking angel was only captivated by the idea of hearing my story.

An insult to any decent novelist.

…

An angel… an angel, huh…?

As I got lost in her blue eyes, searching for the right words and trying to recall any interesting moment that might be worth something to Angelique’s ears, the windows stopped letting in sunlight. Being such a large room, the change in lighting caught my attention, and I turned my head toward the glass right in front of our wooden table, gently pulling aside the worn curtain that covered it. In that instant, the clouds—responsible for the temporary darkness—moved away, allowing the golden rays to once again pierce my pupils. A cruel coincidence.

The brightness made me turn back to Angelique and…

It happened again.

I’m talking about that… that thing. How do I define it… how do I define it without sounding insane? I know I’m not crazy. I couldn’t write so coherently if I were. But… I swear they were there. I swear that every time I’ve seen them, they were really there. I never dared to touch them, and I don’t even think Angelique knows she has them. They’re just there, almost imperceptibly swaying in the surrounding particles, existing only to take my breath away and make me question every decision I’ve ever made. The sun illuminated them fervently, making them shine with radiant purity and exquisite brilliance, even outshining the young girl’s fair skin. Divine, irreplaceable, unique in every possible sense of the word. Lifted straight from a pre-Renaissance sculpture, traced with the precision of a biblical painting, defined with the finesse and attention to detail of the most dedicated artist…

Wings. A pair of angelic white wings sprouting from Angelique's back.

"Hng… Alez…"

She shielded her eyes from the sun, and I let go of the curtain to block out more light. When I blinked… they were gone. As if they had never been there. Not a trace.

I stopped believing in a god a long time ago, too long to swear by anyone's name, but if not that… what can I use to assure you, reader, that this thing I occasionally see on my companion's body is real?

"…"

“Alez…?”

“Yes, I can tell you a story or two.”

“About your friends? About people you met in the army?”

“If that’s what you want to know, then yes. You see…”

. . .

Hours passed. At some point during my long-winded story, both of us grew tired of the desk and chairs, so we moved to the center of the library, settling into that plush, circular sofa that wrapped around the central pillar. I sat with my back leaning against the pillar, and Angelique lay beside me, her head resting in my lap, listening intently as I

recounted fables, my right hand gently stroking her hair while my left held another cigarette.

As a side note, I should mention that I doubt my touch could be even slightly comforting. I've never worn gloves while handling my weapons, so my cracked, rough fingers, battered by years of continuous combat, must be quite unpleasant to the touch. And yet, Angelique hasn't complained about it.

"And how did you manage to escape?"

"From the enemies or from Sergeant Kyd?"

"From all of them."

Her tone was much more cheerful, no doubt. As my fingers traced small circles on her cheek, she

gave me a tender look, only enhanced by her expression of curiosity. She's a charm. Angelique is a charm. Beautiful, beyond any other compliment I could give her. I truly curse her luck for being born in such a complicated time—who knows how far she could have gone with such beauty in normal circumstances.

"Well… after making a colossal mistake like confusing the deployment coordinates, David and I ran for our lives. We were both pale with fear, and our legs hurt so much we thought they would break, but it was that or end up with a piece of lead in our skulls. Terrible idiots."

"You said the ruins helped you."

"That's right. The town of Agordo, in northern Italy, had already been destroyed months before, so the fact that everything was in ruins helped us slip away easily. I mean, we weren't escaping from an entire company. It was probably just scattered

forces, tasked with guarding the area against any attempt at recapture. I bet those poor insurgents were as surprised as we were when we ran into them."

"Did you get reprimanded?"

"What do you think? Because of the carelessness of two not-so-bright low-ranking soldiers, several platoons had to be mobilized to enter a strategically unimportant territory and eliminate hostiles in a relatively insignificant town. A total disaster. We just ran, ran, and ran, occasionally stopping to return fire, but never for more than five seconds. The darkness of the night helped too, of course; otherwise, they would've had a much easier time."

"So the platoons went in and…"

"Killed them all."

I took a long drag on my cigarette and gazed up at the high ceiling as I exhaled. Only then did I notice that the entire room was now bathed in orange. We had spent the whole afternoon idling away.

I felt Angelique snuggle her face against my hand, and in response, I continued to caress her.

“Once Kyd informed us over the radio that the situation was completely under control and that we hadn’t suffered any casualties, we emerged from our hiding spot with faces that bore no resemblance to a smile. I remember it well. David was pale, his lips trembling. I mean, even his orange hair looked as red as fire in contrast with his bloodless face. Kyd’s shout said it all: ‘I’ve never met anyone so stupid!’ And the next thing I remember is two whole weeks locked up in a cell, reflecting on our mistakes.”

“Two weeks?!”

“Yes, two long weeks.”

“B-but two weeks in a cell is…”

“A living hell. But I still think it was a pretty light punishment. Our little mistake could have cost lives, you know?”

“Yes, but…”

“If I were in his place, I would’ve kicked us out of the force. Far too irresponsible. But that’s old history now. The point is that we were eventually reinstated and had to endure the teasing from Zara and the others for a long time. But there’s an upside: everything turned out fine, and now I can tell the story as a small, somewhat unfortunate anecdote.”

“That sounds like you’re forcing yourself to find the silver lining.”

“Not at all. I wouldn’t be telling this story in such good spirits if even one of us had taken a bullet anywhere on their body.”

“Did Zara also scold you?”

“No, she understood that the higher-ups had taken care of that. She just teased us once we were free.”

“Cruel…”

When I focused on her, I noticed a small smile of pity and sympathy, to which I responded with a soft sigh of resignation as I brushed aside a lock of hair covering her flawless face.

“Was it interesting?”

“Yes, it was. This is the kind of story I meant, Alez.”

“You just want to distract me so you don’t have to study.”

“Of course not… We have all the time in the world; I can study tomorrow what we had planned for today. It’s just that… how do I explain it… It’s more fun listening to you reminisce about the good things from your past.”

“Those kinds of comments won’t save you.”

I lightly tapped the tip of her nose with my fingertip and glanced toward the nearest window, now deeply orange. The afternoon was coming to an end. Not much longer until nightfall, which meant it was time to start preparing dinner.

“Turn on the generator, and you can take a bath while I cook.”

I had just started gathering the strength to move Angelique off my legs and stand up when I felt her head press a little more firmly into my lap, and in response, I just gave her a puzzled look.

“There’s still one more thing.”

“And that is?”

“The question that started this whole conversation.”

“The…”

“About the soul.”

“Oh, right. Let’s see… what was it again?”

“Does the soul come first, or does the body?”

“Do you even believe there’s such a thing as a soul, Angelique?”

“Is it wrong to believe?”

“Well… believing itself isn’t wrong. But I wouldn’t expect you, of all people, to put your faith in something so unprovable.”

“Would you rather I try to be as logical as you, Alez?”

Logical. An interesting word she used.

I’ve always been analytical, constantly calculating and deductive, all the time. Honestly, I’ve worked hard to act this way for so many years. At some point, I decided that was the best way to ensure my survival, so I put all my effort into changing my nature. Angelique only knows that side of me—she has no idea what a mess of a person I was before I became what I am now.

Assuming I’m not still a mess, albeit in a different way.

Logical…

I thought once more about the feathered limbs that, apparently, only I could see sprouting from this girl from time to time and almost burst out laughing because of it. Logical. What a bad joke.

“No. Believe in whatever you want, Angelique. Or, better yet, put your faith in whatever brings you the most peace.”

“…”

“And as for your question: I admit I don’t have the answer.”

“I knew it.”

And then she granted me the luxury of seeing another smile, this one tinged with smugness.

Three smiles, each a different shade. I’m not obsessed; it’s just that such a wide range of emotions would have been unimaginable for the Angelique I first met.

That night, dinner tasted much better than usual.

Chapter Five: Zara and David II

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December, 2020

When I was a child, I never truly cared to observe it. But as I grew older, something struck me suddenly—the night sky was breathtaking.

Eternal, impossible to frame or confine. Unchanging, yet never the same. I know I must sound strange, even contradictory, but I trust that anyone reading this will understand what I mean.

Whenever we choose to look up, the view shifts depending on where we stand. More or less light pollution, northern or southern hemisphere, the phase of the moon… Isn’t that incredible?

All those thoughts surfaced that night. I stood frozen, utterly captivated by the endless expanse of deep blue-black that I had never taken the time to truly see. I remember the hardness of the asphalt beneath my back, the rough texture pressing into me as I gazed upward, mesmerized. A star here, another there, the moon in its waning phase, and Venus shining with striking intensity. That night, I even managed to spot several constellations I had once read about in school.

Orion, Gemini, Cancer… They all seemed to return the same curious stare I was giving them. Heh… It sounds silly, but I suppose just as I was astonished to see them for the first time, they too were surprised to find me watching them so intently.

"…"

My pupils remained fixed, yet lost in the vastness of the cosmos. And then, so unexpectedly, it

appeared—a shooting star. Imagine my luck. I had never intended to gaze at the sky, and the first time I truly did, I was rewarded with something many long to witness but never do. The brilliant streak cut across from right to left, momentarily interrupting the breathtaking darkness, yet I didn't even flinch.

The ground was damp, the night… Hmm… I can't quite recall if it was cold or warm. Strange, considering it was winter. In fact, I remember it was just before Christmas. Yes, that Christmas I spent in Spain.

But back to the point: the temperature seemed unimportant, allowing me the luxury of one less concern as I continued indulging in the celestial spectacle above.

So many questions flooded my mind. 'Do humans truly visit that void regularly? Are there, at this very moment, people living up there? That sounds utterly insane. How many ancient religions

regarded the heavens as the dwelling place of their gods? What would their followers say if they lived in this era? Would they see those astronauts spending months in space stations as… deities?'

A philosophy professor could have built an entire lecture around the thoughts I had lying there.

I also recall a dull ache in my head—not unbearable, just bothersome. The kind of persistent headache that lingers all day, no matter how many pills you take, how long you sleep, or how much you distract yourself. You just know it won't leave until the next morning. I tried to ignore it. I wasn't about to let something so trivial rob me of the pleasure of finally grasping how sublime the universe truly was.

Oh, right. A shooting star. They say you're supposed to make a wish. A few seconds after it passed, I remembered that little tradition. But then I wondered— 'what are the rules for that? How long

do you have to make a wish after seeing one? And what about after the fact? Five? Ten seconds? Do I have to think of something within fifteen seconds, or else the chance is gone? Does it need to be sealed in some way? Just thinking it, or do I have to say it out loud? Maybe write it down? No, wait—what would I even do with the paper afterward? And if I do write it, does it count the same if it's on paper or typed on my phone? Does language matter? Because I speak German, English, and a bit of Hungarian, but since I'm in Spain, maybe I should do it in Spanish. Shit, I should've learned more from the locals…'

As I debated the absurd, another streak of light raced across the sky.

'Two in one night? What luck. I'm sure I'll lose every bet with David from now on—I have clearly spent all my fortune in this single moment.'

So astonished by my own good fortune, I recalled something from school. These "meteor showers"

that happen occasionally, when hundreds or even thousands of shooting stars streak across the sky in a single night. I vaguely remembered reading that in some parts of the world, these events were quite frequent. Maybe this was one of them. That didn't make it any less extraordinary to me.

The sky felt like it belonged to me. Every celestial body seemed to align to offer the most spectacular view possible, and all I could do was marvel at every little detail. So much so that I even forgot about my headache.

"…?"

Another one. Yes, definitely a meteor shower. That realization allowed me to relax even more. Feeling as though it was the first movement I had made in hours, I let out an incredibly slow, contented sigh, sinking ever so slightly into the concrete for a better view. Nothing would disturb

this moment. Or at least, I wouldn't let anything do so.

I hadn't mentioned it earlier, but one thing I vividly remembered was the stark contrast between the night sky in a sprawling city and in a place far removed from urban life. The sheer number of stars was staggering. I don't mean to sound dramatic, but witnessing such an overwhelming vastness, I could finally understand why ancient humans felt so insignificant—watched, judged by the celestial bodies above. It was mesmerizing.

I won't say it became a habit after that night, but it's true that I started looking up more often. While standing watch, when a window was nearby, when walking alone through a shattered city… when Angelique… well, that last one is a far more recent story.

Another shooting star.

With each passing streak, the surprise diminished, but not the beauty. It wasn’t just the aesthetics of the event that struck me—it was its sheer magnificence. Just think about it for a second. Every shooting star was a colossal rock, hurtling at unimaginable speeds through the cosmic void. Where had it come from? Where would it end up? Perhaps it had been traveling for centuries, desperately escaping the gravitational pull of some giant in another solar system, like a prisoner fleeing their jailer. And after so many years of wandering aimlessly… it passed at just the right distance from Earth, illuminated by the Sun, and… reflected in my eye.

Anyone who doesn’t shudder at a thought like that has a dead soul.

Perhaps divine will, or maybe a coincidence of astronomical proportions, but such an event—one that defies casual reasoning—had just occurred. And three times! How could I not feel blessed?

Another meteor. And another. Then another. And before I could blink, yet another. A true celestial rainstorm, streaking tirelessly from right to left in a poetic cascade. A part of me felt like a child, mesmerized by an event whose grandeur is studied by scholars worldwide—brilliant minds tirelessly chasing the chance to witness such an astonishing convergence of phenomena.

But no, I wasn't a child. I was a young soldier on duty, who, for the first time in his life, understood what it meant to have ignored something truly unparalleled for so long. If anything changed in me that night, it was that I decided to start paying more attention. To things that had always gone unnoticed. The scent of wet earth, the way icy wind feels when it strikes your face, that exact moment when water grows still enough to perfectly reflect your image… Ah, hell. I lost my train of thought.

And another shooting star.

No, that one was different. It moved from left to right—opposite to all the others. My expression finally shifted. I frowned, thinking I must have made a mistake. But no. Another meteor, again from left to right.

I had never read or heard of a meteor shower where the streaks moved in opposite directions. No, that was impossible. Too unnatural. But another, and then another, and before I could process it, yet another. My eyes widened as I realized the lights were weaving and colliding unpredictably—a chaotic, almost hostile spectacle.

As my gaze darted back and forth, struggling to make sense of the anomaly, the familiar face of my cherished companion suddenly filled half my vision.

“Alez! Alez! Wake up! It’s me!”

Her voice was the only thing I could hear. Zaralyne looked agitated. There was a mix of urgency and fear in her expression. She stared down at me, brows furrowed, and only when I noticed the position of her shoulders did I realize— and feel— that she was gripping mine with both hands. Her dark blue-black hair, like the night sky, was unkempt, strands falling loose around her face. A thin stream of red trickled down the side of her cheek.

"Zara…?"

I finally managed to speak, and the deafening roar of gunfire rushed back into my ears. Zara's face showed a fleeting hint of relief— almost a smile. Then, as I was still fully taking in her features, she turned to call out to someone behind her.

"Alez is awake! He's conscious, but I think he's too disoriented!"

“Tough fucker. We need to get him back! Is he badly hurt?!”

“Doesn’t seem too serious, but his head’s still bleeding!”

I didn’t know who she was speaking to, but I clearly remember how both of them had to shout over the chaos of bullets to be understood. Zara turned back toward me, scanning my body quickly for any wounds. Arms, legs, torso… She didn’t seem to find anything too concerning. The look on her face could only be described as equally relieved and terrified.

“No other injuries— he should be fine if we get him to medics!”

“We can’t move from here, Zara! The second we lift our heads, we’re dead!”

“Zara…”

“If we don’t move, he’s going to bleed out here, Helek!”

Of course. I remembered now. It was Helek.

“Didn’t you just say it didn’t seem that bad?!”

“Hey… hey, Zara…”

My voice was too weak for her to hear. I shifted my head slightly to get a better look at her and caught sight of her companion— gripping his standard-issue AUG, returning fire from behind the makeshift sandbag barricade shielding us. As they argued, my sluggish eyes wandered across the

limited battlefield I could see. Smoke, fire. Rubble all around me. Then, an unbearable pain surged through my skull— the back of my head, specifically. A C-101 jet flew overhead, unloading a 12.7mm barrage at a target I couldn't see, and— Pieces of my memory clicked into place.

Zaragoza, Spain. A joint operation between both nations. With the situation in Austria relatively under control, the European Union had requested support for one of the countries closest to collapse. We were stationed at the main entrance of the airbase, standing guard. David, Zara, and I were on duty. The last thing I remembered was an explosion — and then, nothing.

"David already reported our status, Zara! We just need to hold out until help arrives!"

"But—!"

“Zara, just help me out here, please!!”

At his desperate shout, that woman— just two years older than me— cast me a worried glance, then reached for her rifle, which had been lying beside her. She leaned out from cover and opened fire.

My head was still spinning, and all I could do was watch like an idiot as Zaralyne’s relatively short hair whipped violently from the automatic gunfire. There was another rifle on the ground, and it didn’t take much to realize it was mine. I forced strength into my left arm, reaching out to grab it, but my vision was too blurred. My mind was too slow to be of any use to her.

After such a pathetic display of weakness, I sighed painfully and looked up. Of course, there were no shooting stars in the night sky. Only bullets tearing through the air, streaking past, while light

fighters and helicopters occasionally flashed through my vision.

The damp sensation at the back of my neck? My own blood, soaking my hair and running down my skin. Suddenly, nausea welled up in my stomach, but I managed to suppress it. I reached out again, this time gripping the AUG by the barrel. Pulling it toward me, my pale, trembling hands wrapped around it as they should. I couldn't stand and fire, but simply holding the weapon— this tool of death — gave me a strange sense of security.

And yet, something else was bothering me. Helek, the guy shooting beside Zaralyne, had yelled at her far too harshly despite not even being her superior. In my dazed, feverish state, I told myself I'd hit him later. Of course, I never actually did.

"Alez!"

Zara’s gaze flicked downward again to check on me, her expression shifting slightly when she saw me clutching the rifle. Though she might have tried to hide it, I caught the small smile before she raised her voice again.

“Don’t even think about it, Alez. Just wait, okay? As soon as—”

Her steady voice tried to soothe me, but it failed. I saw it— behind her, against the dark sky blending into her raven-black hair— an NH-90 helicopter closing in. Its side hatch slid open, revealing two Spanish soldiers unleashing suppressive fire against the hostiles pinning us down from the other end of the airstrip. I remember those men were armed with G36 rifles. In fact, I think that was the first time I had ever seen one up close. They maintained fire for about a minute until it was safe to descend.

“Kyd must have sent them, Zara! Get Alez ready to board!”

“On it!”

As they spoke and Zaralyne turned back toward me, the helicopter touched down just meters ahead.

“Alez, let me… take that.”

My ever-protective companion— the one who was always there to help, no matter what— carefully took hold of my arm, lifting me up with gentle but unwavering strength. She never let go.

That was when I finally saw it. The full extent of our surroundings. Austrian and Spanish soldiers returning fire in all directions, while Amere’s forces — nothing more than terrorists to me back then— fought to bring the entire base to ruin. Bodies— and fragments of them— littered the area. Most belonged to the enemy, but many Spanish officers

lay among the dead. One of the soldiers on board the chopper shouted something, but I couldn't make it out.

Zara guided me toward the aircraft, only releasing my hand once I was seated inside. I remember her setting my AUG down beside me.

"We still have to secure the west sector, Alez! Don't worry, I'll be fine!"

Of course, the pilot didn't wait for us to say goodbye. The helicopter began to rise, and Zara just kept shouting as I ascended.

"If you see David or Kyd, tell them this stretch of land is more or less under control!!"

After that, she gave me another of those small, knowing smiles before scooping her rifle off the ground and sprinting off with Helek.

“Shit…”

The men in the helicopter spoke among themselves in a language I had never learned, while I did my best to stay conscious, letting out quiet groans of pain. I don’t know how long the flight lasted or exactly where in the base they took me, but I vividly recall seeing it all through the barely open hatch. Explosions, gunfire, flames, and smoke. Pure chaos. Screams in the distance.

Despite my best efforts, I must have blacked out at some point, because the next thing I remember was snapping my eyes open as the helicopter jolted upon landing. The doors slid open, and Spanish soldiers took me by the arms, pulling me out.

“Alez!! Fuck, you’re…!”

That was David’s voice. As I was helped off the helicopter, the first thing I saw was his terrified face, gripping me tightly on my right side.

“We have a stretcher ready on the right. Help me carry him.”

The words, spoken in that distinctively calming tone, belonged to Allen, the platoon medic. He held my left arm while carrying my AUG in his free hand.

. . .

“Doesn’t seem too bad.”

That was the verdict of the blonde medic with a bitter expression as he laid me face down on a stretcher in the base's medical sector. Wounded soldiers and medics filled the space, the latter rushing from one side to the other, prioritizing the most severe injuries. Groans, stifled cries, ragged breathing, and the occasional feminine voice overwhelmed by pain… I've always hated places like that.

"Good thing, no stitches needed. The dizziness comes from a concussion, and the wound is only superficial, but it's been open for too long. That, and the fact that it's in a sensitive area—just below the occipital bone. Any deeper, and the story would've been different. He'll be fine."

"Lucky bastard. Damn it, he had us worried."

David and Allen kept talking while the latter cleaned my head wound. Then I wondered—why was David in here instead of helping with the

defense outside? Later, I learned that the building he and Kyd had been protecting collapsed. While escaping, a chunk of the ceiling fell on his right arm, fracturing it.

“Alez, can you hear me?”

“…”

“Is that a no?”

“Yeah… I hear you.”

“Vann Floors, don’t make him think too much.”

“Oh, no problem. Alez never thinks too much to begin with.”

Very funny. But, to be honest, knowing David was still this lively helped calm me down. He distracted me—from the pain, from the dizziness, from the horrible guttural sounds that filled the wide hall lined with hospital stretchers.

“How’s Zara?”

“She’s… fine…”

“Just fine? She’s not hurt? Who was with her?”

“She’s fine.”

“You don’t remember who—?”

“Vann Floors.”

Allen interrupted suddenly. I could only imagine the terrifying glare he shot at David that made him fall silent for a long moment. In that silence, the gunfire and explosions outside returned to my awareness. Of course—beyond the relative safety of this space, a brutal battle raged on. Having already participated in multiple defense, assault, rescue, and sabotage operations, I no longer feared combat the way I had back at that parking lot. Still, I wasn’t completely accustomed to it. Maybe I should’ve been grateful for the dizziness—had I been fully aware, my nerves might’ve driven me to grab my weapon and rush back into the fight, injury be damned.

“Alez, one more thing.”

“Vann F—”

“Relax, relax. Just trying to keep him awake.”

At some point, David sat on a closed supply crate beside my stretcher, smiling at me reassuringly. That stupid, pretty-faced redhead. There should be a limit to how charismatic someone can be. I hate to admit it, but his gaze managed to fully calm me down. The bastard was a natural at using his charm, making everyone feel like he was their ideal older brother.

Damn, I miss him.

“Thank you, Alez.”

“Huh…?”

It caught me off guard—my eyebrows raised slightly, which made him chuckle.

“Yeah, figured you wouldn’t remember. You saved my ass out there, man.”

For some reason, Allen no longer felt like interrupting. Maybe he’d finished treating me; I could no longer feel his rough fingers on my nape, only the tight stretch of medical tape covering the wound.

“The first explosion stunned all of us. Neither Zara, you, nor I reacted quickly, so the second explosion—much closer—almost took the three of us out.”

“…”

“I should mention, you were rough. The watchtower beside us started collapsing, and you grabbed Zara by the arm and threw her out of the

way like a ragdoll. She hit the ground hard, but it wasn't anything serious."

I remembered the thin red line on Zaralyne's soft cheek. How curious.

"And right after that, you tackled me, knocking me out of the way. Quite the hero, our supreme savior. That's how you lost consciousness—hit by a large chunk of the wall. When I ran to the main patrol and left you with Zara, you weren't bleeding, so seeing you step off that helicopter like that scared the hell out of me."

Even knowing the sarcasm in his voice, it was unsettling to hear David call me a hero. I was a coward, and he'd seen enough to know that firsthand in that parking lot.

“So yeah, thanks, Alez. I’ll buy you a drink when we get out of this shithole—”

“I…”

“Hm? Yeah?”

“I don’t drink…”

“Ah… he… hahaha, yeah, that’s true. But I’ll make sure that changes!”

“Vann Floors, I’m putting him to sleep to ease the stress.”

“Oh.”

David nodded at our ever-reliable medic with a grin, then turned back to me.

“Good night, Alez.”

“W-wait…”

“No waiting. Time to sleep.”

“What you said… it’s a lie, isn’t it?”

David was… an interesting person. His facade was flawless, capable of deceiving anyone with just a handsome face and friendly words. Impossible to detect his lies, impossible to find anything amiss. However… he was absolutely incapable of hiding his surprise. And this was one of those times. His eyes widened slightly, and his lips parted just a bit—but he couldn’t seem to find the words he wanted.

"…"

That older brother I never had gave me one last smile—that same smile that belonged on a high-end fashion model.

"You did well, Alez. You really did. Good night!"

A sharp prick in my neck and… just like when a computer loses power, when a car engine fails, when a weapon runs out of ammunition, all my senses shut down, and the world turned black.

Nearly three hundred Amere members' bodies were recovered, while ninety-four members of the Spanish Air Force lost their lives during the assault.

Austrian casualties: none. Well—almost three.

Chapter Six: Angelique IV

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May, 2028

Luxembourg was a small country. Nearly two thousand and five hundred square kilometres surrounded by important nations, before the war it's population barely even reached six or seven hundred thousand people. This didn't make it less relevant, at all. In fact, this tiny duchy, still ruled by a constitutional monarchy, had one of the strongest European economies. Small, a highly valuable currency… but it's army was not exactly one to be afraid of. Luxembourg did not withstand the second wave of attacks carried out by Amere, becoming the first country in the old continent to fall. According to some old voices I once heard, they had enough resources to build emergency shelters and even small bunkers all around the woods in the north which was full of plateaus and mountains; they were useless. Aid for this miniscule state did not arrive in time and the capital fell in mere weeks. Later on the

territory would become an intelligence base for Amere and… well… I found out about that through other means.

By the time Angelique and I crossed the non-existent borders, everything, or well, almost everything, was calm there. France no longer existed. Like most European nations, it remained as wild territory and almost all of its inhabitants had been evacuated years ago. Luxembourg suffered a similar fate, but such a small country wasn't even a hot zone like France, where bandits, survivors, military and Amere were still fighting. Luxembourg… looked a lot more like a ghost town.

Back to our situation. We had crossed from Belgium to Luxembourg not too long ago, and that alone was reason enough to feel just slightly safer. This was because, since the nations fell, it was uncommon to find activity in areas far from the cities. That also applied to the south of Belgium. And I say specifically that it was solely the south, because the north of the country was still controlled by the government. I won't lie: I don't know much

about this. We didn’t spend much time in Belgian territory. But we did use their routes to easily enter the small neighbouring country.

Oesling, that is –was— the name for the northern part of Luxembourg. A lot of mountains and hills, not an easy place to travel on foot, which is precisely why I decided it was our best possible path; less chances of encountering hostiles. Plus, I had some good info on my hands about some certain fortifications that had been built, and I was curious if we’d find anything of worth. Now that I read that last sentence I realize that the reader might think something along the lines of “This man just hiked across a devastated country with complicated geography, just out of curiosity?”. The answer is: no. We had to cross some of the states in the east of France one way or another, but if given the choice… come on. Time wasn’t really a problem and nowhere was truly safe, it was just a slight detour for a few weeks.

Oesling’s irregular forests are beautiful. A true natural wonder that I had the pleasure to appreciate

despite the dark times we were living through. One could not simply calmly walk through those green masses, even though the local fauna in those forests was mainly comprised of small animals, nature's takeover of civilization could attract more dangerous creatures.

"Isn't it too hard?"

"No"

"I could try softening it if you'd like"

"That's not necessary"

"Alright…"

A wild cat.

It was close to midday, Angelique and I were enjoying a wild cat as our meal. The ones at fault were my reflexes and my fear of running into a beast which I wouldn’t be able to deal with. That’s when I woke up lying against one of those trees and saw something observing me from a branch on another tree not too far away from me, my senses, slowed from just waking up, made me grab my pistol and shoot instantly. It was incredible. In a fraction of a second I took my 92, pointed at the head of that mysterious entity with one hand and fired. The flashiest and most out-of-a-movie shot I’ve ever done and it was just to kill a curious little cat that wasn’t even trying to stalk us. I wasn’t going to let that meat go to waste so I took the opportunity to eat an animal I’d never tasted before.

“It’s got a ton of fiber. I would rather have kept eating preserved food”

“…”

“But I used a bullet on that animal. Not using those nutrients would’ve made it feel like a waste”

“…”

“It’s not like it tastes bad anyway”

“…”

It was like talking to a wall. We’d known each other for almost a year, but my silent partner was hesitant to ever answer my words. How to define her? Maybe a small and loyal robot at my disposal. Sometimes… sometimes she terrified me. I’m not talking about her per se but rather, our relationship. If I told her to point her gun at someone and fire she never asked why. If I told her to take someone’s

belongings while I cut them down she did not refuse. It was perfect obedience.

“Since we’re in a forest we should try to find a tree with fruits. It’s been years since I tri—”

“Yesterday I saw… an apple tree”

I got a reply. Another note for my book.

Of course, I started rambling again without describing our situation. We were already in Luxembourg and it was our fourth day hiking through the forests in the country’s “Cold Zone”. Which in that time of the year –mid spring— wasn’t exactly too cold. Trees then bushes then more trees. There was nothing of interest in sight yet. Though every now and then we’d see a cabin with nothing of value inside which we’d use to bathe and sleep, but

far from those precious little towns surrounded by green that I'd seen in postcards and photos.

The calm weather made camping easier. Without having to worry too much about the cold we just had to look for a clearing where we could lie down comfortably or some thick tree trunk we could sit up against to cover ourselves with the same blanket. We looked more like adventurers than survivors.

"Great, that means we'll probably find another one later on"

We made a fire in the centre of the small clearing where we'd stopped to cook and eat, there I threw the poor cat's bones to turn off the fire. I'd like to clarify that prior to this whole odyssey of mine I had never skinned an animal before, but the circumstances I was in made me learn it the hard way. Not without first getting my fair share of bad experiences.

Once we packed up –intelligently and avoiding unnecessary weight so that my backpack, which was tied with a knot at the front, wouldn’t become an annoyance— and we were rested up, we resumed our journey. Once again walking, crushing sticks and avoiding the sun. Birds everywhere, the sounds of insects, the light breeze and the sound of leaves brushing against each other. Traversing nature had always been more enjoyable than exploring ruins.

Unfortunately, the long-awaited tree never showed up and I had to conform myself with a piece of meat covered in vinegar as a snack. I hate them, I hate preserved food. They all taste the same and, even though the process is useful to keep it in an edible state for a long while, the smell is horrible. Though it may sound odd, Angelique seems to like them quite a bit. I’ve never asked her because I fear she might ask me to make more. I’m not the best partner, that’s for sure.

So what happened was that, as we walked and I swallowed with disgust, washing my mouth with some water, Angelique walked a few steps ahead.

She must’ve been quite surprised by whatever she saw, seeing as she suddenly stopped and by consequence I bumped into her from behind, spilling some water on her hair. No; she didn’t even react.

“Angel?”

“…”

I put the cap back on the bottle and stored it in my backpack, completely silent as I grabbed my rifle. Back then I still used my ACE as a primary weapon, whereas Angel just used the Steyr M9 that she’s kept until now. I leaned slightly forward; positioning my head just beside my partner’s to get her same field of vision and then I understood the situation without her needing to speak.

At around a hundred metres ahead, barely visible between the trees, on top of a small hill that was

remarkable even for the plateau that we found ourselves in, was a robust-looking fortification. I'm not sure if it really qualified as a bunker, but it was more than clear that my bullets wouldn't be able to penetrate its rocky walls. It was rectangular, measuring maybe 20 metres on the front and who knows how many long. It didn't have any real windows to the sides of its metallic double door, but there were some slits, around a metre tall, evidently they'd been used to defend the place from within. Its surface was completely covered by bullet impacts, some of the rocks on the wall were even broken. Someone fought here.

"I get it… Do you hear anything?"

"No."

"We'll wait a while in silence. If you still don't hear anything then we'll enter."

I said “in silence” and she carried the order out immediately, her only response was a nod. We sat down almost at the same time next to two different trees and stared at the fortification above.

Check my mags, my rifle, think up an ideal route, giving the order of direct elimination. I had enough time to do that during the hour in which we waited silently. It even gave me the time to quietly appreciate Angelique’s silhouette carefully observing our objective.

Almost a year had gone by since I’d found her. Her hair was no longer as short as before and the ends almost got to her shoulders, but her face and figure had barely, if at all, changed. If there was something that had noticeably changed then it was definitely her performance in battle; she’s a great student. Ever since that time in the flowers her attitude made a slight and sudden turn. Killing quickly became necessary for her, she understood taking a life as a way of surviving and she did not have a problem with executing someone from

behind if that someone had the potential to endanger her survival.

Or at least that’s the reason I thought she had.

“Nothing?”

I broke the silence, getting back on my feet.

“No, nothing.”

“We’ll go in then. Don’t lower your guard anyways. It wouldn’t be strange if someone was using such a secure fortress as a hideout.”

“In case we find someone…”

“Direct elimination.”

I only received an “Understood” as an answer before we got back on track. Obviously, even though the situation seemed favourable, lowering our guard was completely forbidden. Sliding in between the tree trunks, we did not use the environment’s sounds to camouflage our footsteps; we walked faster the more noticeable the wind was.

The slits on the bunker were too thin to see the inside clearly meaning we didn’t have much visual information. I’ve always been proud of my good sight, so I suffer considerably when I’m not able to make the most out of it. I had Angelique as my ears, who in from one moment to the next, opened her sparkling eyes in surprise and stopped, once again, in her place. I turned my eyes to her and heard her speak.

“Alez, I heard a—”

The following burst of gunfire spoke in her place.

Small bushes, pieces of wood and dirt began being kicked up right in front of us as the automatic fire of a few rifles could be heard.

Surprised and without having been able to find, in that fraction of a second in which I looked back at the bunker, our aggressors, I forcefully took Angelique by her arm and began enacting a lateral retreat.

“From inside! They’re inside!”

She screamed and I ran, avoiding the fort, hearing the sound of trees being penetrated get quieter and quieter. I didn’t think about it clearly in that moment, but the fact that they hadn’t shot at us as we ran meant they were firing without aiming.

Suppressive fire? Or were they just trying to scare us away? Well…

“Run to the door!”

I let go of her arm to look back at the long hole on the wall, still, without noticing anything in my field of view, I raised my rifle. Angel followed my order without question.

I only managed to see two barrels peeking out and firing lead alternating at the place where Angelique and I had been before. How dumb could they be? Who would waste so much ammunition in a situation like this? You don’t even need military training to understand that saving munitions is vital for continued engagements, even more so when you lack a sustained supply.

Taking a few seconds to carefully aim, I opened fire at the barrels in short, controlled bursts trying to harm or at least suppress the hostiles. Maybe I was even trying to just scare them to make them understand they'd entered a dangerous combat. Whatever my intentions may have been, one or some of my shots luckily managed to hit one of the barrels. They must have been firing the weapon at the time as I managed to hear a deflagration before a small explosion, and then a high pitched scream from inside.

My assumption: the barrel and/or the receiver exploded due to a faulty gas ejection, maybe disarming the shooter's hand, or even worse: causing damage to their face and chest. I also imagined that, due to the tone of the voice I heard, the shooter was a woman.

Measure my brutality? Try not to hit critical shots? No… That kind of mercy doesn't exist out there. I've seen men with no legs shoot others in the back who had previously offered their help only to

steal their food. In this painful world of today, being merciful will only mean your death.

Maybe it’s that, or maybe it’s just me who’s seen so much and lived even more, that refuses to end up devoured by dogs simply because of trust.

“Alez! It’s not locked!”

I ran to my partner, with about 5 metres separating us, and after moving her to the side and repositioning my rifle, I gave a strong kick with the sole of my foot to the metallic door. It didn’t make much noise due to how robust it was and both Angel and me were the ones that filled that loud emptiness, quickly entering the building, ready to shoot down any objective present.

“Clear.”

I called out in a short and dry way before quickly closing the door behind me.

The interior was predictable. As soon as we made our entry we ran into a wide concrete staircase that went down for only seven or eight steps to a lower platform that was part of the primary section of the bunker. There, was a cramped hallway with a high ceiling which went through the entire fort.

Everything in this place was a muted grey, with rough but well illuminated surfaces thanks to the white lamps hanging from the ceiling.

“Angelique.”

“I don’t hear anything.”

The shots had ceased. It was obvious they'd heard us come in and were preparing for close quarters combat. I began descending through the staircase with my back stuck to the wall, my rifle ready and its muzzle pointing at the hallway as the angle allowed me to observe it from a safer position. Once I reached the limit where I could go down without exposing my back, I lowered the front of my ACE and signalled Angelique to do the same.

"Clear."

She had a beautiful voice when she was younger.

Once both parts were clear I dared to step on the lower floor to get a better look.

There were about 10 metres worth of hallways to each side. Lights on the walls, a very tall ceiling and several doors to both sides. At the end of each

hallway was also another staircase that went up to the side opposite to where we'd come from.

"Voices. There are also some hurried footsteps."

"Are they all coming from the same direction?"

"Yes. The right. The corner they shot at us from before."

I'm not sure, dear reader, if my inexperienced way of narrating is capable of transmitting what I felt then. I'd found myself in hundreds of similar situations, and this one was not even close to the most dangerous, but the tension that is produced when you feel that at any moment someone could break through a door and kill us in an instant never disappears.

Without any orders, Angelique looked at me, while I thought what plan of action we should take. I turned to the noises and burnt the layout of the hallway into my retina: the door closest on the wall on my right, the next to the left and the last one on the far right. Predictably, the last door would serve as the entrance to the room where the hostiles were to be found.

I advanced carefully, trying not to give away my footsteps and placed my hand on the steel door's handle.

"If something moves inside, shoot it."

A redundant order. I breathed in and pushed the door in as fast as I could, sweeping my field of vision with the rifle in search of an enemy although, maybe luckily, there was none.

“Entry!”

My partner entered the room and, repeating the same process as before, I closed it behind me. With a quick look I found the lock on the door and used it to provide us with some minimal security for a few minutes.

“Alez.”

I turned and saw Angel doing the same with another steel door. A door I’d failed to see before.

“Angelique, that door leads to…”

“The noises come from the other side.”

“Then…!”

“They know we’re here.”

I stopped to think for a second, taking the opportunity to explore the room with my eyes. It looked more like an administrative warehouse but with the size of an individual living room. A few wooden desks in one corner, the next corner –the one closest to me on my right— was filled with bookshelves in a complete mess filled to the brim with documents and folders, the one opposite to it had a small table screwed to the wall with some dishes and dirty utensils, as well as two chairs, and in the last corner was the door that lead to the unknown hostiles.

As should be done, I quickly searched everything in sight.

“I want you to stay as alert as possible and tell me any relevant information you hear on the other side.”

“They seem to be thinking of building up their defences.”

With the characteristic violence of someone who scours a place without worrying about how the objects inside end up, I began to practically demolish the bookshelves in search of anything that could be of use to us. Every time I took an archive and threw it to the side the entire shelf shook strongly and the pages written on in various languages fell. No, I did not stop to read what they were about. It wasn’t important just as it isn’t now. Yes, there was a chance to find some type of secret shelter or something of the sort but honestly it was too improbable for me to consider it.

“Someone’s crying. They… they’re saying he lost a hand. And that person said that one way or

another he’ll use a weapon.”

“Wait…”

“Hm?”

“No, it doesn’t matter. Go on.”

Angelique only spoke French. The fact that, miraculously the hostiles, probably inhabitants of old Luxembourg, were speaking French was strange to me. I mean, as far as I remember it was one of the country’s official languages but I’m not sure it was used much. I decided to leave that for later.

“Can you tell how many of them there are?”

“No. They’re all talking at the same time and there’s a bunch of them.”

“Chaotic.”

“It even looks like they don’t care much about the fact that only a wall separates us.”

“They’re probably just civilians or bandits. It won’t take long.”

During the conversation I scoured the interior of the drawers in the desks. Broken radios, batteries, a few bullets, spent casings, paper, more paper, pens, coloured pencils, geometry instruments, maps, map charts. Nothing too interesting really, with the exception of a military topographic map which I thought might be useful to traverse the country. That was the only thing I stored in the interior of my coat.

“One of them is lost.”

“Lost?”

“They’re saying one of them isn’t close. They don’t know where he is and are discussing whether they should go get him or not.”

“We’ll take the lead.”

“Alez?”

Angelique’s eyebrows rose in surprise when she saw me carelessly throwing the empty drawer to the side and making my way to the door from which we’d come from initially.

“They’re too indecisive; they won’t take the initiative to come out. It’s our chance to eliminate one of them while he’s alone. Clearly we’re at a numerical disadvantage, so equalizing their numbers will be the best plan we can take.”

“…”

She simply nodded and ran after me.

I carefully pulled the door handle, spying each side to check that there was no one in the halls and stepped outside. I stepped outside…

The instant I put one foot outside the door, the door on my right that connected the hall to the enemy, suddenly opened. To put it in an understandable way, it was like going from a state of tension level 1 to 10 in a fraction of a second.

It was instantaneous. Without needing to identify objectives I simply raised my ACE and fired. Something moved, something screamed, something fell. Something tried to close the door but the something from before was in the way and stopped it. Angelique was precise in peeking out and firing as well. The enemy didn’t even have the chance to respond in the first place. The sparks, smoke and confusion produced by the noise didn’t let me notice what was happening.

Something else fell to the floor and, although the door stayed open, nothing else came through. My ears were assaulted by a horrendous ringing. A concentrated firefight in a closed room can leave anyone without protection deaf.

After a few moments without any movement I lowered my gun and signalled Angelique to cover me. The smoke began to dissipate and the ringing slowly disappeared. Then… then…

“The hall is clear, but there are still people inside, Alez!”

“…”

“Alez?”

They were young.

The bodies full of holes of two kids Angel’s age lied down on the floor over a growing pool of blood that spread both in and outside the hallway.

The time it took for me to see the scene was not more than 2 seconds but it was enough to understand, partially, what was happening.

The inaccurate shots in the forest, the fact that they didn’t follow us when we escaped, the unlocked doors, the minimal coordination, the indecisiveness, their non-existent spatial awareness… it all made sense once I found out the age of those “enemies”.

The dishes, the colour pencils. The amount of unburnt classified documents, the unused maps. The high pitched scream. It didn’t belong to a woman, but rather a kid whose hand had been destroyed. That same kid, with red hair just like David’s, was lying there. He was the first to fall, in other words, the one who opened the door. His left hand was covered by a plastic bag, and in his right hand was a Glock 17.

The other one fell a second later, almost sitting, with his torso against the wall, and his brown coat’s hood covering his long black hair. In front of him was an AUG in a terrible state which fell out of his hands once enough bullets had stopped his motor functions.

Both weapons were part of the standard issue for the Luxembourg armed forces, meaning those kids had found it in that very same bunker. Probably reserves that were left behind when the army was defeated.

How did those kids get there? Such an inaccessible place, certainly dangerous and far from any towns or cities. Did they go there in search of weapons? Probably not. They would have to had known they were there. I didn't know then, and I'm still not sure now, because…

"Someone's running towards us from that room!"

Angelique's words brought me back to reality. I located the only door on the opposite side of the hallway, I kicked it open after ordering her to stay put. It was a bedroom but I didn't bother much with the details. I heard a couple shots coming from my partner's pistol and reloaded my Galil's empty mag

before peeking out again to suppress the same objective as before.

I heard a scream and someone falling. Only I advanced. Watching the corners through my iron sights and breathing heavily.

Once I was next to the doorway to that hot room from where we'd been shot at I put my back against the wall, my backpack, which wasn't too packed, didn't bother me that much. There I felt the heat emanating from the 3 corpses on the floor but I forced myself to ignore it.

Then I turned. Knowing that my enemies were far below me in technique, reactions and professionalism, I aggressively made entry and fired. They were 3 young kids, two carrying handguns without any sort of protection. Before the first one could manage to line up his eyes with his sights, three 7.62x51 bullets impacted his left shoulder and neck, falling him instantly. The second, a pretty tall

kid, managed to fire once but he hadn’t even put both hands on his weapon yet; a single shot went through his right cheek, killing him instantly. The third ran towards the door Angelique had previously locked –the one that lead to the administrative warehouse— and made a futile attempt to open it. I wouldn’t have shot him if it wasn’t for the fact that, when he saw me kill his two friends, he jumped on the body of the taller one to try and grab his Glock; I was forced to pierce his back and neck with 2 shots.

And that was it. The entire room smelled like death and only I stood within, inexpressively looking at the faces of those objectives that never had a chance against me. It looked extremely excessive, but… but… What would you have done in my place?! It’s not that easy to think rationally and morally when the most miniscule doubt means that you or your companion end up with your brains splattered all over the floor! I feel no remorse! I know that you, if perhaps the world is back to stability, are reading this in a comfortable place in your home, you’re thinking of me as a cold blooded assassin who doesn’t care about committing an atrocity! But I don’t care! I ended those children’s

lives because it meant securing both Angelique's and my safety AND I WOULD DO IT AGAIN IF IT WAS NECESSARY, WITH THE SAME OR EVEN MORE FORCE! You don't live my life! You don't understand how it feels to be unable to trust anyone! Mercy can lead you to ruin if—

…

I decided to take a break before continuing this story, but here I am again. Where was I?

"It's clear."

Once I said that Angel moved the corpses at the entrance to follow me inside. It was a simple room. A few staircases that went up for about a metre so that the shooter could position himself near the slit in the wall from which they could open fire. Some ammo boxes and medical supplies next to the walls,

but nothing of note. Of course, there was also a destroyed AUG on the floor.

“Empty the Glock mags and put the bullets in your backpack. I’ll… I’ll go check the bedroom I saw before.”

“Understood.”

I slowly went back .

The bedroom was… a bit more complete than the rest of the rooms. It was pretty wide and spacious. There were 10 or so beds with grey blankets, almost all of them were a mess and, I must say, for a dorm full of kids it was surprisingly well organized. Drawers to the sides, a desk with some drawings on it, the hanging lamps turned off and in one corner a barrel that seemed to have some clothes and a few backpacks.

“They’ve been here for quite a while.”

I approached the barrel and checked inside. Coats, a few hats, an umbrella, another backpack and… a small bag that caught my eye as it had something inside. Letting the rifle hang by its sling I took the bag with both hands and positioned it so that the light from the hallway allowed me to see what I was looking at.

Within, a small blue container had some chalk and a flyer. I focused on the paper and suddenly that strange situation I found myself in made some sense.

“‘Arlon Orphanage’. That’s Belgium. It’s not… not too far from here but, how long has it been since the south of Belgium fell? Maybe four years? Or three? These kids can’t have been here that long… no, maybe the region they were in fell later and… and then they had to flee, finding this place by pure coincidence.”

As I deciphered piece by piece the mystery of having a military full of kids who didn't reach past twelve or thirteen years, the shadow of someone standing in the hall caught my attention and distracted me from reading the rest of the flyer. I didn't raise my head, seeing as I was making sure there wasn't anything else inside the bag.

"Did you finish checking the mags from all the handguns? We're going to take one of them as insurance. Those kinds of guns are very reliable and it wouldn't be bad to have one in an emergency. Choose the one that looks best and—"

Click.

The single release of a firing pin that wasn't hitting a cartridge. I looked up, as surprised as I was alerted and I froze up.

He was slightly shorter than the rest, he must've been around ten years old and his height gave him away. I don't remember much about his physique due both to how many years it's been and due to the tension I felt in that moment which only let me see the gun in his hands.

The muzzle was pointed at my head, it was shaking a lot and it shook even more whenever he tried to pull the trigger but… but nothing happened.

"W-w-w-why won't it…?!"

He spoke French.

I didn't even take my rifle. There was a mag in the Glock but evidently it was either empty or the bullet had not entered the chamber. He angrily pressed on the trigger, hating the tool in his hands and wondering why he couldn't kill me right then

and there. Truthfully he had no idea. I let out a silent sigh, realizing that I'd made a fatal error by lowering my guard like that, the enemy in front of me was completely inoffensive.

"Lower your gun, I'm not going to shoot you"

I tried to sound convincing, but it only made him angrier, and caused him to continue, pointlessly, trying to shoot me.

I thought of the easiest way to jump on him, take his gun and leaving him unconscious for a while so that Angel and I could leave, but before I could even approach, a real shot replaced the previous clicking.

I jumped back and opened my eyes from the shock.

The boy in front of me fell. His head hit the floor and the gun in his hands bounced over to my feet. He didn't die instantly as his arms still moved desperately trying to cover a hole maybe near his neck.

I stepped forward and Angelique's silhouette came into view.

I was afraid.

Looking at the expression on her face you could've thought Angel was furious, scared, sad, happy, excited or… or dead. It was a completely blank expression.

"Ange… Angelique wai—"

I couldn’t finish the sentence. She raised her Steyr and executed him with a shot to the head, the boy stopped moving.

“An…”

“That must’ve been the one that got lost. We forgot about him because of the fight”

It’s true, we had heard one of them got lost. But that didn’t matter to me at the time.

I threw the bag to the side and without thinking I jumped on Angelique.

“Al-?”

I grabbed her by her shoulders and pushed her against the wall.

“Why did you shoot him?!”

“I-I don—”

“You heard the noise his gun made! You knew it wasn’t loaded! He couldn’t kill me!”

“B-but Alez you—”

Her eyes looked confused, I can’t blame her. That was the first time I screamed at her like that and… and honestly I wish it had been the last time.

Yeah… I don’t like being this way.

I can’t help it sometimes, I can’t even avoid it, or control myself. I don’t even know when it started.

Sometimes, I suffer from short yet intense fits of rage, and I always regret yelling at her afterwards.

I’m just a crazy old man in the end.

“Knocking him out was more than enough! What use was killing him like that?!”

I must’ve looked like such a hypocrite.

“Why?!”

“That was because…”

I don’t think I’m a bad person, but I’m not good either. I just try to survive, meaning that while I can mercilessly kill someone who puts my safety in danger, I’m not interested in causing pain if it’s not to that same end.

“He was Alez’s enemy.”

“What…?”

“All of Alez’s enemies are my enemies too, right?”

“B-but this… this kid wasn’t a threat, then—”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ve always received order after order to kill the enemies that attack you. It

doesn’t really matter how dangerous they are.”

“Even… Even if they’re disarmed?”

Had I really given her orders like that? To be honest… I don’t remember.

“Even if they’re disarmed. And, even if I hadn’t received those orders… I want to protect you like you protect me.”

Nearly 2 minutes passed by in complete silence as we stared into each other’s eyes. Then I let go of her shoulders and turned to grab the Glock on the floor.

It was all my fault. A little girl, fourteen years old at most, taking lives indiscriminately and with no remorse, in an absurdly inhuman way… for me. She

was my tool. It was then that I understood I had turned that girl into a tool to help me survive, and she didn't care in the slightest. The creation of an innocent monster.

How horrible, how disastrous, how immoral.

Who could I ask for forgiveness for something like that? God? I stopped believing a few years back and seeing the entire continent in ruins wasn't too inspiring to say the least.

Yes, I was no longer a believer, but as I picked the gun up from the floor and put it in my backpack I could only think of one thing:

'God, if you're up there. Let all the sins Angelique commits be my burden'

…

We abandoned the bunker and continued our path to the south east. There wasn’t much light left and there were no towns in sight, so with the help of the topographic map I found earlier I found the best clearing to rest comfortably. We’d left the bunker only half an hour earlier.

I was exhausted and could only think of lying down to sleep, but when we got to the clearing, surrounded by green pastures and fruit trees we ran into an unexpected scene.

A boy, maybe thirteen years old getting down from a branch with two apples and a younger girl waiting below. They had old clothes, almost tattered. Neither looked in our direction.

“Alez those are…”

The kids heard Angelique's voice and turned to see us, horrified when they saw the rifle hanging on my chest.

"L-Lucas!"

The pale skinned girl with short blonde hair screamed and hid behind the bigger boy, who had a slightly darker skin and brown hair. Like an animal defending its cubs, the boy stared at me with ferocity. Disarmed, but it was clear he was ready to kill me with his nails and teeth if necessary.

Angelique pointed her gun at him. It was clear the kid, named Lucas, wasn't going to be able to close the 10 or so metres that separated us before Angel fired.

I put one of my hands over hers and signalled her to lower her weapon, which she did without complaining.

“Leave.”

It’s all I could say. I didn’t have the energy to deal with something like that again.

Still in an alerted state, Lucas looked around, searching for the best place to flee through, he took the girl by her arm and ran away with her through the trees.

“Alez, they… that direction… they’re going to the place we came from.”

“We’ll keep going.”

“Weren’t we going to rest here?”

“I changed my mind. There’s a less exposed clearing near here an hour from here.”

“But…”

I didn’t pay attention and kept walking. Sighing from the exhaustion.

“But there’s apples here…”

I searched one of the pockets in my backpack looking for the Glock that kid was carrying. I had to clear my doubts about something.

“Well… there may be more up ahead…”

Angel was still talking to herself. Which, in case I haven’t mentioned it before, was stranger than snow during summer. Maybe she was trying to cheer me up?

…

The crunch of sticks under our feet, the smell of nature, the light that slowly turned orange, the sounds of insects…

The Glock wasn’t even loaded.

Chapter Seven: Zara and David III

+

I can’t pinpoint the moment in my memories when I first lit a cigarette. The ordinary kind, I mean, the blond ones with light tobacco.

I have a rough idea of when it might’ve been, though. It must’ve been during high school, when I was playing the part of a rebel, or perhaps a thrill-seeker, like any teenager, sneaking away from classes to claim the school as my own.

Behind the gym, I’d climb the service stairs to the first-floor rooftop, slipping between water tanks until I reached the air conditioning vents. I’d scramble up quickly to avoid being spotted, and then I’d arrive at the highest roof on the second floor, where I could see nearly the entire campus. Don’t ask me why, but that place was littered with old

desks—dark, rusted, their wood rotting away, yet for some reason, the administration refused to toss them out. It was the perfect hideout.

I'd build a makeshift shelter, settle in comfortably, and pull out a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, and a pair of binoculars I'd bought with my savings. I'd scan my surroundings once more, ensuring no camera could catch me, and then I'd light up, savoring the calm.

The binoculars? Well, the high windows of the girls' locker room were angled just right, letting me peek inside without leaving my seat.

I'm not proud of it, but I'll justify it by saying I was just a laid-back, selfish kid with zero ambition —though, truth be told, not much has changed, except maybe the laid-back part.

…

I’ll never let Angelique get her hands on this chapter.

The point is, I’m certain that’s how I smoked my first cigarette. At fifteen or sixteen, around the same age Angelique had hers. I say “around” because, as I’ve mentioned before, that girl’s true age is a mystery to me. Her name, her origins, her birthday… I’m only 99% sure she’s French, but that’s about it.

Back to the story, what I do remember clearly is the first time I tried a black cigarette.

Harsh, bitter, it left a rough texture on my lips, sour, stifling, scratching my throat, releasing an aged, almost musty essence… and yet, somehow, it tasted like peace.

I’m no fan of those smokes—honestly, I don’t even like them—but there’s something about them. Despite how much they repel me, the feelings from that first time flood back whenever I light one up. They transport me instantly to another state of mind. They… soothe me. They ease my nerves. They trick me into believing everything’s alright.

I hear the same voices, see the same faces, feel the same drunken dizziness, even smell the same food. The fire warms me just as it did, the night breeze cools my cheeks, I ignore the same distant lights, and I glance at my rifle with the same indifference. I half-listen to the same stories, admire the same girl’s silhouette, get scolded by the same teammate, and offer the same excuses. The moon still hides from the sky, the same clouds loom overhead, the same dog howls in the distance, and the same guitarist makes a quip about it. I steal a glance at the sharpshooter to my right, the same redhead on my left tells me we did well, the burning wood crackles again, and I fill my lungs with the same smoke curling from the cigarette between my fingers.

February, 2021

I don’t know the exact date or place, but I know it was in France. Exhausted, after wrapping up an operation whose name escapes me, with positive results but a significance that, years later, feels hazy. On the edge of a nameless village, abandoned by war, right beside a dirt road, we decided to have a picnic.

Traveling from the southern Iberian Peninsula to northern France was grueling. Air travel was avoided due to Amere’s air dominance. Plotting flight paths that wouldn’t get us shot down was a nightmare… and the moment we arrived, we were handed the reckless order to patrol the southern route to Chambois.

Amere knew the strategic value of French territory for controlling central Western Europe, and they threw everything they had at breaking its

defenses. The skirmishes and battles there were long, brutal, savage, and devastating; I fought in many, but that's not what I want to write about now.

Around midnight, an hour after we'd secured that village far south of the city, the French forces we supported set up a security perimeter around the settlement, posting guards everywhere. VBL armored vehicles patrolled the area, MAG machine guns covered every corner, comms units chattered constantly with two UAVs circling overhead, and there were operators and soldiers to spare. Add to that the NATO support forces, who'd even deployed anti-air defenses. I say "they," but in the end, I was assigned the same way.

The mix of personalities among the forces was something else. The bulk was French army, but there were also two German platoons, a couple of American agents, a Belgian platoon, Swedish specialists, and an Austrian platoon—us. Oh, and plenty of other soldiers from different nations, sent for intelligence tasks while aiding the French.

Language barriers, as you can imagine, made real mingling tough.

“I don’t care, I prefer smaller groups. Like ours.”

“Don’t you want to mix with other cultures, David?”

“It’s not that I don’t want to. Trust me, I’d love to have that Russian from earlier sitting on my lap while I teach her German, but dealing with cultural differences is just too much hassle for me.”

“Russian? There’s a Russian? Where?”

“You didn’t see her at the briefing? She was off to the side. Not during the deployment either? She wore this tight uniform that… what, not even in combat?”

“David, in all three situations you mentioned, there are far more important things to focus on. How do you find time to spot the same woman three times? I’m not the one slipping up here!”

“You’re slipping by not noticing that bombshell! Seriously, Alez. One of these days, an AT4 round’s gonna hit us, and you’ll die without ever taking it easy for a single day.”

I clicked my tongue, annoyed at his grim example. He knew I was terrified of rocket launchers. He kept talking, but I tuned him out, my eyes drifting to the group finishing the second large tent across from the bonfire.

Helek was there, along with Mike, Henry, and Zara.

At the center roared a massive but contained fire, to the north stood two sturdy green tents, a dirt road ran alongside, and around the flames sat nearly our entire platoon. Nearly, because some were on security duty and couldn't join us. I'll write more about my platoon someday… maybe.

"Roa and Freak, go grab more firewood."

"There's enough wood for the whole night, we're fine."

"Will either of you be sober enough at 3 a.m. to chop branches when the fire's dying?"

"Uh…"

"Why don't you go, Evans?"

“Yeah! Last I checked, you’re not exactly a sergeant, so don’t boss us around.”

“Because I’m cooking! Can’t you see? Did those radios fry what little brains you have left?”

“And who are you to talk? Failed marksman, when was the last time you got a key role with Zara or Erica around?”

It might sound like a heated argument, but they weren’t serious. The others laughed and egged them on, settling closer to the fire. We seized every moment when Kyd’s eyes weren’t on us.

David and I stood a bit apart from the rest, just watching for now.

“Hehe… hey, Alez…”

“Now what’s your deal?”

“I was thinking, you made a weird face when I mentioned that Russian.”

“I didn’t make any face.”

“Oh, you did! You whipped your head around like a starving dog! You into Russians?”

“Russians are…”

Pale, silky skin, clear crystalline eyes, a sleek, defined figure, an accent that could shatter glaciers, a demeanor that… yeah, I had a highly flattering

stereotype of Russian women in my head. I liked them. Still do.

Back then, I'd only seen a few Russian women in person, and they all conveniently fit that image. Not my fault.

"Yeah, Russians are pretty…"

"Look, over there."

David turned me around, the bottle in his hand sloshing with clear liquid.

"See that shack? No, not that one. The one with the broken window and no door. That one… closer to the center. That's where the Russians are. I saw them go in a few minutes ago."

“Them?”

“Yeah, three or four of them. From what I overheard, they’re here to study Amere’s attack and defense tactics. Intelligence found traces of insurgent activity in Siberia, and these Slavs want to be ready so they don’t suffer like Europe is.”

Right, I remember now. Back then, Amere’s name was starting to circulate, mostly among troops, not so much civilians. The group was gaining strength.

“Are they military?”

“Probably Spetsnaz GRU or something like that.”

“Are there women in the GRU?”

“Do I look like I’d know?”

“No.”

“Damn, I wish I spoke Russian to ask her. That, and a few other things while—”

“Someone’s coming out…”

“Oh! Finally!”

Not caring if our teammates behind us noticed and wondered, we crouched and took cover. One of the trucks we’d arrived in was parked nearby, and it became our hideout. David yanked me by the collar

and positioned me behind the cab, where we could peek out clearly.

I heard the bottle cap unscrew, then saw David take a hefty swig.

“And that’s…”

“Vodka.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“Spying on a Russian and drinking vodka, it’s the way to go.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“If we ever go to that country, I’d love to try Sbiten. And Kvass, they say it’s milder, but it sounds intriguing.”

“You’re not gonna tell me where—”

“Here, you’re getting drunk with me.”

And he handed me the bottle.

When I was younger, I barely drank. My tongue couldn’t handle strong flavors, and my tolerance was pathetic. Honestly, I only drank because of David.

“Just a little…”

The liquor burned my throat.

“Brr… it’s strong…”

“Shh! There they are!”

A man stepped through the doorway. A burly, muscular, intimidating figure in a heavy-looking uniform, his face hidden by a helmet.

“I still haven’t seen that guy’s face or heard his voice. Total mystery.”

And he kept drinking, carefree.

The operator carried a long, sturdy rifle on his back, fitted with a massive, eye-catching suppressor. I know the weapon, though its name escapes me. It’s

the sniper version of the ASh 12.7, a Russian beast named for its caliber.

Two more followed, both wielding cutting-edge AK-12s from that year, which I never got to touch but would've loved to. They were bareheaded, but one caught my eye—short, pale blond hair, almost white, and a face marred by what looked like burn scars.

"The one with the scars is… Igor, maybe? No clue. He's tight with the Russian wo—there! Our target!"

The woman who stepped out only cemented my stereotype.

A beauty, about a hundred sixty five centimeters tall, with nearly white, impeccably straight hair tied back, two thick strands framing her porcelain-

delicate face, their ends nearly brushing her modest chest. Her sky-blue eyes gleamed behind rectangular glasses. Her lips curved into a soft smile that matched her tailored gray suit, more suited for a secretary than a battlefield. Even her tie complemented her gaze. She clutched a clipboard tightly to her chest, looking utterly professional.

She was stunning, a perfect ten.

“Woah…”

“A star fallen from the sky, right? And those glasses—I hadn’t seen her wear them before.”

“No weapons. Not even a holster.”

“You’d have lost it seeing her fire that Abakan during the op. She wore a dark blue uniform… I’d

bet my life she's intelligence or special ops. And she's—"

"Gorgeous. She's gorgeous."

"She's gorgeous, Alez!"

I snatched the bottle from David and took a swig, my eyes never leaving her.

Her eyes and hair shimmered vividly under the floodlights the French had set up everywhere.

Thanks to the V-neck of her suit, I could glimpse a faintly intimate sliver of her alabaster skin, and—maybe it was the vodka talking—I ached to kiss it just to feel its texture.

David and I were like wolves eyeing a rabbit.

Though that rabbit could probably snap us both in half with a single move if she wanted.

“Anya.”

“Anya?”

“That’s what I heard someone call her earlier. If that’s her name, it suits her perfectly.”

“Anya…”

“Damn, if I were her target, I’d let her seduce me and spill every secret I have.”

“It’s not that you’d let her seduce you—you wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“I’m not you, Alez. I wouldn’t fall that easily. You, on the other hand, look like you’ve never touched a woman in your life.”

I glared at David and smacked the truck’s hood. I hated how he always put himself above me, no matter the topic. It really made me feel lesser.

“What do you know about—?!”

“SHH!”

David waved his hands frantically in front of his face, signaling me to shut up, but I didn’t catch on right away. I don’t recall what else I yelled, only that

he glanced back at the people we'd been watching, and I followed suit.

She was looking at me.

"Ah…"

Maybe I'd raised my voice too much, or the smack on the truck was too loud, but I'd locked eyes with that pale-skinned beauty, her expression icy.

She carried no weapon, but her stunned look was enough to disarm me. I didn't know what to do.

"She's…"

Heat rushed to my face, my cheeks flushed, my mouth watered. I was as nervous as a student facing the worst exam of the year without studying.

Damn it, David was right about me.

“Idiot.”

David grabbed my collar again and pulled me behind the truck. We both exhaled, hidden at last.

I wasn’t scared of us getting scolded for acting foolish in front operators from all over the world; I was just mortified at looking so ridiculous in front of her.

The worst part? I never locked eyes with that Anya again.

Abandoning our espionage mission, we rejoined the platoon and sat by the fire. Everyone was there, chatting, playing cards, teasing, laughing, joking, as if we weren't in the heart of Europe's worst war yet. Some warmed food over the flames, others bragged about combat feats and body counts, while a few just watched in silence, their smiles a mix of calm and drunkenness.

They didn't even notice us slump onto the ground.

We stayed quiet, taking in the scene. David passed me the drink, I passed it back, and we went back and forth until the bottle was empty.

Time passed, and I don't recall what we talked about. Everything only felt significant again when our missing friend showed up. She plopped down beside me, slapped my back, and sipped from a gray canteen.

“Did you hear that?! Kiara’s smashed and told Mike she wanted to do something with him! But he’s just as drunk and burst out laughing!”

Zaralyne was cackling, still smacking my back. She’d clearly had a lot to drink too.

“Hahaha! Oh… poor girl. The look of shock on her face was one-of-a-kind, though I felt a bit bad for her. Then Mike tried to backtrack, saying she’s actually really pretty, but it was too late! Kiara was already crying.”

“Should you be laughing that hard about it?”

“I don’t know, Alez. Honestly, I don’t.”

“That’s rough, Za—”

“Javier! You pulling out the guitar?”

Oh, right. Javier was the guitarist. I’d forgotten.

“She’s not even listening to us anymore.”

“That one you played last time, what was it called?”

My vision blurred at times, and I couldn’t shake a vague fog in my head. My eyes felt sensitive, so I looked up slightly. Away from the fire, I spotted… hills in the distance. Not too tall, not too close. On a whim, I stared at them, trying to gauge the distance by guesswork, and then…

An explosion. Then another, and another. The sound didn’t reach my ears, but far off, atop those rises, a battle raged in full force. People were dying practically before our eyes, and we were living the night like it was a party.

But… so what? People died daily, and I’d long stopped flinching at turning bodies to lead-riddled heaps. Far or near, in front or behind, it didn’t matter. I didn’t care—though maybe that was the booze talking.

I lifted my gaze higher, to the sky. No moon in sight. I was about to let myself wax poetic, but the slurred voice of the redheaded drunk to my left yanked me back to earth.

“You know, Alez…”

He held another bottle—rum this time—half-empty.

“Maybe we don’t have a Russian in the platoon, but we’ve got some top-tier quality.”

“Zara?”

“Huh? No, not Zara. I mean… wait, you into Zara?”

“I think she’s pretty, at least.”

“Guess so… but no, not her. I’m talking about—”

“Erica.”

“Yeah, Erica.”

Erica Dusternduub, our platoon’s second sharpshooter. A blonde who always wore her medium-length hair in a single ponytail at her neck. Short, around a hundred fifty-five centimeters tall, she was our group’s icon of beauty. An Austrian-German with an addictive accent, a face so cute it begged you to make her smile, and a body… the uniform looked incredible on her. To top it off, she was ridiculously friendly, easy to approach, great at conversation, and always seemed to have endless topics to discuss. She wasn’t an expert at much beyond shooting, but she got excited learning new things. And…

“Good. Glad we’re on the same page, Alez.”

“Bet the whole platoon is…”

“By the way, Alez…”

“…”

David leaned on my shoulder, flashing an irritating smirk, sloshing his drink loudly. I pretended I didn’t know what was coming.

“You… no, actually… I heard some rumors, Alez.”

“There’s a lot of rumors going around…”

“No, no. This one’s got witnesses and everything. Alez, you…”

“Gonna keep your mouth shut tonight or what?”

I swiped the bottle from his hand and chugged, trying to kill my brain cells before hearing what he'd say next.

"You got something going with Erica?"

"…"

"Alez~"

"It's not a thing or anything…"

"No way… it's real?!"

"It was just a moment!"

“Spill. Spill before I kill you out of jealousy.”

Not long after what happened in Zaragoza, we had a gathering much like this one, with booze and all, but at a cheap hotel where we rented out a whole floor for the night. We had a day or two off from our duties. Everyone was there. We laughed, drank, talked, all afternoon and night. At some point, Erica came over to me—I don’t quite remember why. David and Zara were passed out in a corner, too drunk to stay awake. She sat next to me, told a couple of jokes, and we both laughed. She was plastered, and so was I. By accident, my hand landed on her leg, and she didn’t pull away. She looked into my eyes, gave a shy smile, and…

“And the next thing I remember is waking up to a high-pitched squeal, seeing her on the other side of the bed, clutching the sheets, holding her head, and trembling as she saw me—like her—stark naked. Neither of us remembers exactly what happened.”

“Every detail was true! You made history, Alez!”

“Who told you?! Who was the witness?”

“M-Mike! Mike said he saw you two getting cozy on the couch that night at the hotel, then disappearing down the hallway. That’s all it took for everyone’s imaginations to run wild.”

“Poor Erica if she finds out…”

“You guys think Erica’s that pretty?”

Zaralyne seemed to have only caught half our conversation, or she’d have chimed in on the other topic. Either way, she didn’t hesitate to butt in.

“It’s tough when your teammate gets all the praise, you know?”

“Jealous of Erica? Or is it envy?”

“It’s more than that. I don’t care that much… no, that sounds contradictory. I care, but not because I want to outshine her—it’s that she proves my grandpa was right.”

“Here we go again…”

I elbowed David in the ribs as he chuckled quietly while I downed more rum.

“When I was a teenager, my grandpa told me I was too unladylike, that I’d lose my ‘charm’ because of it. I’d snap back that it didn’t matter, that being as

good a shot as him was more important than being… feminine.”

“And he’d say…”

“He’d say that had nothing to do with my lack of grace.”

“Hm…”

“And now look at Erica! She’s an incredible sharpshooter and oozes femininity and beauty from every pore! Fuck it! Fine, I’ll admit it—I’m insanely jealous!”

“You’ve got your own charm, Zara.”

“I don’t want your compliments, Alez!”

“Can’t win ’em all, kid.”

“I told you to stop talking to me like that!”

Someone laughed nearby, and I glanced over. Javier was subtly watching us. I acted like I didn’t notice and closed my eyes, but before I could lose myself in the platoon’s laughter and murmurs, a loud, distant howl hit my ears.

“It must hate our fun.”

The guitarist said, and I just huffed, opening my eyes again.

“Oh, right, I’ve got something else for you guys.”

David said, rummaging through his many pockets.

“More stuff? Where’d you get all this, David?”

“Well, remember when we cleared the village? Kyd put me in charge of checking the southeast houses, and since there was no danger, I poked through a few drawers.”

“Da—David! That’s looting! It’s a war crime!”

“And you’ll get me locked up if you keep yelling, woman!”

“And you only found booze?”

“Also a couple of watches, some jewelry, and… this!”

The redhead raised a worn, leather-covered brown box in his right hand. Inside were twenty black cigarettes.

“Huh… never tried those.”

“First time for you then, Alez.”

He lit three and handed one to each of us.

“Ugh… guys, I don’t even smoke…”

But Zara was so drunk she didn’t hesitate to bring it to her lips. We exchanged a knowing look and took a long drag. David exhaled in pure relaxation, I grimaced at the bitter taste, and Zara coughed.

“K-kuh… this is awful, how do you guys stand it…?”

“I don’t like it, it’s… no, the flavor’s just bad.”

“What do you two know…”

Only David truly enjoyed it.

Chapter Eight: Angelique V

+

Fall, 2030 — Winter, 2031

“If you were to ask me, the most amazing part of it all is they closing so firmly, as if they were expecting to come back one day.”

“Maybe they really thought they could return.”

“No. When cities went empty was because they were already completely under Amere’s control and almost always they ended up burnt to crisps. Only a fool could have thought they could come back to their home.”

“Maybe they were fools.”

“Maybe…”

“And how did the ones that are inside right now get it?”

“I think they got it through a window, or maybe they found another door.”

I don’t mind wearing warm, bulky or heavy clothes, but Angelique hates it. If I let her be, she would walk on the snow wearing some shorts, a long t-shirt and only her cloak covering her from the icy wind. But allowing her to go out like that would also mean having to take care of her lying on the bed with a cold for a whole week and… while watching her look at me from the bed with those puppy eyes sounds a bit tempting, I don’t want to see her that sick. Not again.

And so, both of us were accordingly protected against the cold weather. That leather jacket she was wearing was originally too bulky for her liking, and then I had to mess around a bit to find the way to make it comfortable for combat, and now it has some belts around the arms and forearms, and around the waist and chest too. It looks better than it sounds, really. I'm even quite proud of how good it looks on Angelique. Her hair is loose, sometimes, and she doesn't hide it inside the jacket; she doesn't wear the hood if I don't tell her to. She's so good at avoiding rules.

"And if the ones who closed it all were those who are hiding inside?"

"They should have found all the keys to do that and that's unlikely"

"That's true…"

“Anyway, it’s closed. We’ll take the door down”

“We will make a lot of noise”

“That’s better than just letting it be. Besides, we’ve done this a lot of times before”

“We didn’t bring an axe or hammer”

“Not a problem. If we’re gonna storm in anyway, I’ll just shoot the lock off”

We both looked up and sighed at the same time. Such a sigh was quickly carried away by the wind, and covered by the soft snow that fell… and fell, and fell down until it was enough to cover our soles.

That was an apartment building of around twenty stories tall. All cracked, unsafe-looking and with all those white walls sprinkled. It looked robust, nevertheless. Just a few of the dozens of windows were still intact, and most of those were covered by curtains from the inside, so we weren't able to look inside. Moreover, all the windows on the lower floors were planked from inside.

Angelique was carrying her Rattler. Hm, I might have not mentioned that one before. MCX Rattler, an automatic short-barreled rifle, 5.56mm. It's small and light, not weighing much more than the UMP that she always carries, but with higher power. Surely, I had to teach her how to handle a stronger caliber, but I have already talked about how good she is at learning.

And another thing, I know it might get a bit confusing reading me describing so many weapons, but it's not a lie that Angelique and I have a small armory at our home. It's not a big deal, it simply works like this: we find an hostile, he carries a firearm, we kill him and we take his gun. In the end

we’re just saving up what we steal from other people, and that’s precisely why our equipement has so much variety. If only we had an effective way to get ammo…

“Aren’t we talking a bit too loud?”

“What’s worth for being silent at this point? If they realized you saw them, they probably already know we’re coming for them and they are ready for that. Being honest, I’d rather let them be if I knew they are not going to assault us first, but I can’t take anything for granted.”

The girl simply let her shoulders fall down, trying to understand my reluctance. But when she saw the tip of my gun aiming at the gun, her white hands, covered by those gray gloves, gripped on the rifle.

“Alright… remember the order: direct cleanse.”

Ah…

As always, I began telling the story from the end and not from the beginning,

---

Let me recap.

One day before…

…

It’s never clear who’s gonna take care of the cooking everyday, and so the one who ends up doing it is the who feels like it. Well, that morning I was busy, taking care of our equipment in one of the many basements the mansion has. This one is precisely arranged for us to store and maintenance

our guns. This is also where I teach Angelique how to solve any problems that might happen when handling a firearm, and how to fix them by herself. But now right at that moment, since she was in the kitchen.

When I was in the military school, one of my teachers once said that safety rules were made by someone that saw another someone get their head blown off out of carelessness and decided that was not the best way to go off, and so after analyzing what exactly happened they wrote down what one was not supposed to do. And that's how safety was born, and you should respect it. That tale has never left my head and so, even if I really wanted to do it, I did not smoke inside our improvised workplace, and I just held a lighted off cigarette between my lips. I'm a responsible person, or so I like to think.

On top of the table in front of me laid down a gun. That UMP45 I have mentioned so many times before, completely disassembled. Around the many separate parts, my tools. Most of them improvised by memory, built with stuff I could find in the city.

A couple of bottles of oil prepared by myself, brushes, rods, rags, more and more brushes, and a water bottle. The water is there to drink it if I begin dehydrating. In that room, in that very tiny basement, we also have the boilers that allows us to have hot water, and so the room temperature tends to go up and I sweat like a pig, even my hair gets wet; the worst part of not cutting my hair is that the sweat tends to make it stick to the back of my neck, and it feels gross. But I highly doubt someone is interested in the issues I get myself into just because I just don't feel like cutting my hair.

What else, what else…

Well, on the wall just behind that table -I mean the one I have right in front of me when I sit down to work— there's a screwed toolbox where I store my stuff. Just aside of it, at the right, there's the stairs that lead to the ground floor, and by the other side of the stairs there's another table just in the corner of the room. All over that room there are a lot of boxes, shelves and some more places where I put out anything related to my guns. Parts that need

some fixing, ammo, more oils, more tools… and guns. Some… decent amount of guns. In the shelve behind the only chair in the room I put the guns I have ammo for, and in the one at the left I put up all those trophy guns I mantain but it’s extremely unthinkable to find ammo for, and I just keep them because it would hurt too much to throw away. A noticeable piece is that P90. I only have a single mag and 23 5.7 rounds for it, so it’s practically useless in combat, but I couldn’t get rid of it. I got that one when I stormed into a— no, I won’t spoil that story.

Back on topic, we’ve got revolvers from .22 to .44, pistols up to .45, three submachineguns, and a couple of assault, tactical and even a pair of sniper rifles. It sounds unbelievable, but I have a story for each one of those weapons. Some I can use, and some not, either because I don’t have ammo or because they are broken and I’m not able to find the pieces to repair them.

The ceiling is low, the walls are gray and the floor is made of wood. At first there was just a

single lamp hanging from the center of the room, so I set up another one near the table so it's easier to work without burning my own eyes. I'm good enough with just one of my senses deteriorated.

"But I do this mostly because I'm bored, not because I really need to do it…"

It's not like these guns were mistreated all the time, not anymore, and it's not like they were used constantly day after day and they needed to be taken care off all the time, and neither like we dirtied them to camouflage them or while we escape… not anymore. I only do this out of pleasure and to kill time, because trust me, reader, living everyday without any work nor anything important to do… alright, maybe generalizing is not a good thing, but at least I think this kind of life is pretty stressful.

While I used a cloth to wipe off the oil on the cannon, my vision dazzled and vanished off sometimes, letting me watch that naked

submachinegun on the table and my dirty hands, and at the same time those still vivid memories of myself doing that very same thing, but with my old provided AUG, on top of a blanket on the ground inside of a tent in the frontier between Switzerland and Austria. That night the bombs were dropping close, real close… it's true, I was scared to death, but it was just a matter of trusting our intel service, because they assured we had not been discovered and those being smashed to bits were the Swiss. Zara was sitting in front of me, doing the very same thing with her own rifle, trying to come up with some chit-chatting in order to make us forget the gritty reality. David was sleeping. That motherfucker was sleeping as if nothing was happening out there. It's not like he went to bed to ignore the bombings, but he was already sleeping when the show began and the explosions didn't manage to wake him up. Even the damn floor trembled, but David didn't wake up.

I was living in my own memories like an old man right about meeting death, but the knocking on the door at the end of the stairs brought me back to the Earth.

“Hm? What is it?”

I heard the door being open, and I tilted my torso to the right to look, climbing up the stairs with my sight. At the top was Angelique, holding the knob with a hand and looking rather worried… no, it was more like a mash of anger, frustration and a little bit of worry.

“Gas…”

“Ah, shit…”

I dropped everything on the table, lazily wiped my hands, climbed up the stairs, exchanged a couple of words with Angel, we both sighed at the same time and walked to the kitchen.

“I thought it was almost full.”

“It is my fault. Since I haven’t been cooking lately I didn’t check on it and…”

The kitchen is big, but, to be honest, I spent all my willingness to describe a room talking about the workshop so I’ll just talk shortly about the place where we cook. Just your basic, everyday cooking equipment, but bigger. A nicely sized fridge that’s almost empty and shelves and shelves and shelves and shelves on the walls of the room. It’s all wooden furniture that’s a bit too fancy to my liking, white walls and a big metalic kitchen bell above the stoves. For the rest, use your imagination, because I just don’t feel like wasting my words and time describing a kitchen that looks like… hey, that’s perfect. You want more details? Just think of a kitchen that you’d see in the house of the duke of a fairly rich nation, or a not-so-relevant noble, or a corrupt politician that doesn’t want to attract too many eyes. That’s a perfect description. The only difference from those magnific views in your head right now, is that we don’t have natural gas running

through the pipes so we need to use gas cylinders to heat our meals. Where do we get those from? From the bottling plant, of course.

“What time is it right now, Angel?”

“Maybe… around eleven in the morning.”

“This will take our whole day…”

“The weather does not look very calm to the north.”

“And if tomorrow rains then that means two or three days without eating warm food.”

“Then…”

“Yeah, we’re leaving right now. Go put on a coat and take the Rattler for you and… and you already know what else to take, I don’t need to repeat it.”

“Just the 92 for you?”

“Yeah, yeah. Quickly, let’s not waste time.”

I put on my coat, set my handgun, softly hit Angelique on the back because I saw her boomed about having to use that tight jacket and then we both walked out of the mansion through the west door. Patience, later I’ll explain why I didn’t bring my rifle with me.

I’m not really sure if it was just chance or some kind of safety perimeter was established for some time around the place, but that street that hits on the mansion perpendicularly by the west side is in a

much better shape than the rest of the town. Sure, there's always crumbled down buildings, but not on the same intensity. I hope I'm being clear.

The floor is almost unscathed, there aren't that many ruined buildings nor abandoned vehicles. The houses and stores look entire… it's weird, but appreciated because if we are in the dire need of some object we know we might find it around here. But don't take it wrong, it's nowhere close to a shopping center. It's just fairly better than the rest of the destroyed city.

At least, walking around here doesn't feel as hopeless.

"If we had a cart or something we could bring many at the same time and have them on stock so this doesn't happen."

“Can’t we build one?”

“Well… wood is easy to collect, we could just break apart some furniture, but I haven’t seen a single car wheel that’s not depressingly flat or straight up cut. Otherwise I could build a wheel, but I doubt I’d get that right.”

“Then…”

“Yeah, at least for the moment, this is the only way.”

“Can’t I help you taking a second one?”

“They are too heavy for you. Besides, someone’s got to hold the rifle, right?”

She pouted lightly and I sighed with a smile. I turned around and the way ahead, as always, was long, but we could see the bottling plant.

“I don’t think our life here is that bad, you know? But this… this is definitely the worst part. We have hot water, tons of clothing, some amusement, electricity; if only we didn’t have to walk this much whenever we run out of gas… still, I think it’s a very small con if we take into consideration all the pros. A perfect 360° panoramic view, food reserves, water. We’re lucky, or we’re maybe too good at picking places. What do you think?”

And Angelique wasn’t by my side when I turned my head to see her.

“Hm?”

Many, many steps behind, she stared up at that tall apartment building.

“Ah… could you please tell me when you’re gonna do that? It was very cute when you were younger but now it’s just frustrating.”

That was a lie. I still think it’s cute.

I walked back over my footprints and stood by her side, trying to find that thing that caught her attention.

“Did you see something?”

“No…”

Making a facial gesture I've only rarely saw her show before, Angel avoided my gaze and frowned a bit before walking ahead of me, following the route as always.

"I saw nothing strange."

"…"

That made me doubt, but neither I found anything weird looking upon all the building's windows, so I just shook away that doubt and kept walking.

…

The travel was long, boring and eventless. A tedious four hours long walk to arrive, and the only thing that managed to distract us for a second was seeing the sky getting cloudy.

“Do we know how many left of them there are?”

“No.”

“Well, we’re not starting today. I’m already tired enough.”

Just like pretty much any other facilities, that plant was abandoned when people left the city. And, obviously, they didn’t have the time nor the means to take all the machinery with them, neither the resources or products they made there. When we found it, it felt like being a portuguese merchant of the XV century discovering a new route that could take him to the India faster than any other. It was perfect. We didn’t need to resort to firewood anymore to warm our food, nor eating those horrible, cold conserves I hate so much. Since then, what we do is simple: I carry a tank on my shoulders using both hands and walk home while that girl protects me from any danger. Can you see it now?

The name Angel fits her like a glove. Although… to be honest, we've never had any major issues visiting the plant. Maybe one or two dogs getting annoying, but that can be easily solved firing at the ground almost all the times. So I repeated the same as always, grumbling as I felt the weight on my shoulders and walked out. Angelique skipped past me, showing me her back.

"There are two rooms full of them, we should not worry."

"Two rooms of them are too few, Angel."

"Too few?"

"How much more time do you think we'll live in the mansion? To me… it will be long, very long until we leave. That, if we ever get to leave."

“…”

“Once we run out of tanks, we’ll need to collect wood and stuff again, so we bether make the best use of what we have now.”

“I guess so…”

Maybe feeling down -or maybe not, I don’t know-, she replied without turning around and checked the chamber of her gun.

…

She looks so professional. Is she the one who’s got a natural talent as a soldier, or is it me the one who’s really good teaching? One way or the other, her abilities speak for themselves. The way she gently turns her rifle, those discrete head motions

when she’s exploring the zone, the concentration in her eyes… we didn’t even talk, I just wanted to watch her back as we walked.

Those were another four hours walking, but this time carrying a damn thirty-kilograms tank on my back. A torture. I’m not Heracles, and my body is not as sharp as it used to be some years ago, so taking breaks was more than necessary. When we got back to that certain spot on the streets, close to home…

“Ah… my back is killing me…”

“…”

“Hm?”

Angelique didn’t reply, and she stood in her place one more time. When I followed her gaze, I found that same apartment building. She noticed me stopping too, and hastly marched forward like it was nothing.

Angel, not only I have three times your training and four times your habituation, but I also have five times your experience. I know when things aren’t going alright, or when somebody finds anything strange but doesn’t want to say it out loud.

I let her be.

We walked home, but night arrived before us. We closed to door, I set up the new tank and let the day finish normally. Nothing to remark. But the next morning…

…

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

I jumped on her early in the morning as I was supposed to if I really wanted to scold her. I woke her up when the sun wasn’t completely up yet, I hurried her into getting dressed and took her to the living room. There I told her to sit on one of the couches and stood in front of her. Maybe surprised, or maybe not -you can never know with this girl-, she seemed to understand right away what I meant.

“You saw something on those apartments, didn’t you? You think I’m that easy to deceive, Angelique?”

“But—”

“You can’t justify it!”

“W-we did not have the tactical advantage. It was risky and—”

“And it was a better idea not to tell me and letting me walk two times across the same spot like an easy target?”

“…”

“It’s fine for you to have your own ideas, Angel. But don’t even think about skipping over what I know! What would have we done if the second time they sweeped us from a window we couldn’t even see? What would hiding such relevant info from me had been worth for?”

There was no response. Her eyes sticked to the floor, her fingers interwined on her knees and a sight of sadness and guilt on her face.

It’s not like I enjoy doing this, but if I wasn’t clear on the grave mistake she made…

“This is will be the last time, Angelique. If you see or hear something you’ll tell me right away and I will be the one making the choices.”

“…”

I clenched my fists, vaguely angry upon not getting any words from her but, before getting carried away, I just took a hand to her head and, roughly, yet not violently, I made her look into my eyes.

“Roger?”

“Roger…”

. . .

There’s a map in my room, or maybe I should say a sketch. It’s a vital piece of intel I made myself, showing every important area of the city that we have found out of. It’s big, taking half a wall both in height and width and it’s never finished since I keep adding new pieces of paper whenever I find a new place. Everything’s there. The bottling plant, the not-checked-yet important buildings, the zoo, the avenues, the residental area, the industrial area, the main park, the empty Amere reservoir, the refinery, the hospitals and clinics, the university, the mental health center, the commune… and a lot of more things I’m yet to tell you about. I’ll do so, if I think it’s necessary or interesting.

“I thought it’d be rain, but it ended up being snow.”

“Does it benefit us?”

“I’d have preferred the water. Those departments are… somewhat close to the commune, and the sounds of the rain would have covered the tentative fire.”

Angelique got closer to the X I drew on the map and looked at its surroundings for a moment.

“We still need to explore so many places…”

“We can’t afford breaking into as many buildings as we want. Our ammo and resources are limited, and pointless fights are to be avoided.”

“And yet…”

“If we are capable of determine is some place is safe without getting to close, then we can roll the dice and try to find something useful inside.”

“What are we going to do now?”

“Well, we are already stepping almost blindly into unchecked terrain so we’ll make use of the situation to look inside.”

“I will bring my backpack.”

“Good idea.”

She turned like she wanted to say something else, but she swallowed her words and I lighted up a cigarette before continuing.

Where do we get so many cigarettes from? Good question.

“Back on topic. The building is rahter rectangular and generic, not that big, but pretty tall so I guess it must have only two entry doors. The thing is we can’t reach what could be called the laterals and backdoor, so we can only barge through the front door.”

“Always avoid main doors.”

“Hm?”

“That is something you said long ago, in France. We were thinking about breaking into a hou—”

“Wait.”

I took a moment just to breath in and not smile out of the bliss that brought me acknowledging my tuitions and teachings were not just wasted on Angelique.

“Yes, that’s right. You must always avoid main doors whenever it’s possible. Unfortunately, we don’t have another choice here.”

“A front assault.”

“Yes, a frontal assault.”

“Like in Belgium.”

“Like in… Belgium?”

“Yes. Shortly before crossing to Luxemburg we were careless and our bags were taken by two strangers and the only way to take them back was storming into a storehouse that—”

“Yeah, I remember. But we can’t use the same tactic this time.”

“So no starting fires.”

“No starting fires.”

Maybe she wanted to let me know that it would be the easiest way to dabble in and that’s why she frowned a bit, but she didn’t say anything else.

There was nothing else to talk, and nothing else to settle. We loaded our guns, we fixed our equipment and we went hunting.

…

And that takes us back to square one. That was quite the long introduction, wasn’t it?

“Breaking!”

Without further ado, I shoot two times at the lock on the main door of the building and a couple of times up and down just in case there were some extra locks inside.

I didn’t need to yell out every single order for Angelique to know what I needed her to do. When I kicked the door open and took cover to reload my Benelli, Angel quickly took my place and sweeped the first room with her iron sights before taking cover too.

“Clean.”

I cocked a round into the chamber with the slide as I nodded. Then I turned around and barged inside, I took a couple steps in besides my partner and, when it was obvious that the building hall was empty, we both kept quiet.

“…”

“I can’t even hear footsteps.”

“It’s a large building. If their base is upstairs there’s no way for us to hear them.”

“Alez…”

I spinned on my own foot to look at her, and I understood that weird tone of her voice.

“I do not get it…”

Angel closed her distance to the marks on the floor that suggested that years ago there used to be a desk there, and some other furniture too, and then she picked up some rotten wood up from it, arching her eyebrows like a little girl.

“There is nothing here, Alez.”

And it was really nothing. Not even the frames of the windows, nor the reception furniture, or the lamps hanging from the ceiling or the wiring that would keep them on. It was like the room of a house just bought, except for the dirt. Two hallways opened up from the wall opposite of the main door, and between them laid some wide stairs, in the

middle there was an elevator so old that I wouldn't have stepped inside it even if they told there was a chocolate cake waiting for me inside; I really miss those.

What were the boards and locks for if there was nothing left inside? And it's not like some bandits could undress a building like this, and even if they could, why would they do that?

We exchanged some awkward looks and checked into the security, service and even hosting rooms from the lower floors, but everything looked just the same: deprived of anything.

"This place…"

"This shit has zero sense. And I hate not knowing what's exactly happening."

“I am getting nervous.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“What are we going to do?”

“We’ll go upstairs. I’m starting to think you just imagined seeing something here, but seeing how mysterious this place is, now I want to explore it.”

“Roger.”

“…”

“I will stick very close.”

“No, no, Angel. There’s little room and—”

“I will stick very close not bothering you to maneuver.”

I stopped just after climbing two steps and I looked down at her trying to say ‘what’s into you now?’, but she simply averted her gaze with some enviable speed. She’s cold, expressionless and hard to read, but I know her too well!

“I told you not to read scary books if you were going to end up believing them.”

“I don’t believe them. I have never seen a ghost or anything alike, so I don’t have any reason to believe such things.”

“Then, why does your lower lip tremble when you stop talking?”

“Ah…”

I sighed annoyingly and let go of it so she didn’t get mad. Suggestion is such a powerful weapon. And I’m not talking about watching a scary movie and not daring to walk at night into your own home. No, no. Suggestion is WAY more dangerous than that, and it’s results can be spectacular; both good and bad. If you know where your enemy is, but his base is too hard to assault and you don’t know what to do, you just need to harass him day and night with attacks of all kinds. Effective strikes, strikes that you know that won’t be effective, stealth, explosions, dynamism and stoicism. That is, reader, psychological warfare, and it’s very base is suggestion, which will make your enemy submit before you even plan a final attack.

We walked up stars. Infinite, unending stairs. And we stopped to clear floor after floor. And all of them looked the same. A hall and two long hallways by the sides of the stairs.

“Ugh…”

“What’s in your mind?”

“I would have liked not to get into this building ever.”

“Ninth floor…”

“And not even a damn closet at sight. They took everything. It’s tremendous work for a team with cranes and all that, just imagine how impossible it would be for people that at much could have a couple of cars.”

“And the comune?”

“They don’t mess with this stuff.”

I placed a hand on a wall to rest my weight and caressed that piece of clothing hanging from the window with the back of my other hand.

“And, even so, they didn’t take the curtains…”

“They didn’t want anyone to look inside?”

“Why would they care? There’s nothing here to steal.”

“Nothing.”

“Not a single thing.”

Just pulling weakly from it, all the rusted locks broke in half almost at the same time and the curtain fell down without making noise. The pale sunlight, tainted by the clouds, illuminated the room… althought there was nothing to illuminate. I leaned onto the glass to look outside.

“Will they return, Alez?”

“…”

I knew who she was talking about. She wasn’t talking about the former residents of the building, or they owners because, being in such a high floor and looking outside, that lost relevance. Angelique watched far away. Leaning against the frame of the window with her forearms, her eyes wandered lost

into the landscape of a dead city. An inert city, covered in snow and rust. Will people return to populate these lands one day? To restore what once was their home? What kept them away for so long? It was already not very common for us to walk into Amere forces, how much of the horrible, massive war I had told her about was still onging? I know all those questions remained inside her head. Her… those blue pearls were mirrored in the glass, and they distracted me. I tried not to gaze away from that polis forgotten by the world. The skyscrapers by the other side of the center of the city, the residential area, the comercial one and the industrial one… we could see everything from up there, and everything looked as silent, calm and peaceful as always. I wanted to keep watching things that way, I wanted to appreciate the war as the result and rest of a fruitless operation that humans performed because they didn't manage to properly calculate the correct way to reach peace, but her eyes didn't let me. Like a ball spinning at high speed doing big circles inside a funnel until gravity forces it to fall at the center, or like a celestial body which dark end was to be catched by a dark hole, my sight ended up drifting by itself towards Angelique's eyes reflected on the window. They looked… always so reposeful. Always serene and immovable, but they are so

impossible to ignore. Just like… like… the most beautiful statue in a plaza full of attractions and banalities of all kinds; that statue is the stillest and least noisy element of them all, but it's impossible for you to go speechless once you walk by and see it. That's just the way I see Angelique's gaze.

"Were cities fun, Alez?"

"I don't know. Never stopped to think about that."

Out of the corner of my eyes I noticed her wings being born once again. I didn't move my pupils away out of fear of seeing them disappear.

Statues…

That’s how she looked, resting against the window with a melancholic look in her face and a pair of wings on her back, she looked like a piece of art made of limestone of the most exquisite quality. But it didn’t last too long, for when I blinked they vanished again for who knows how long.

“I see…”

I caressed the hair of the angel that follows me all around and issued the order to continue with the search.

We walked up some more floors and we found a fire extinguisher. Why do I mention it? Becuase it was literally the only thing we found in that building from the first floor up to the thirteenth floor. We were quite surprised. We even double checked it didn’t have any bombs or that it wasn’t a trap. In the end we took it from the wall and threw it out of the window because we still weren’t feeling safe around it. There are all kinds of surveillance equipment and

I didn’t want to take the risk. Exaggerated? Probably, but there’s a reason I’m still alive and so many others aren’t.

We stepped into the fifteenth floor and she stopped abruptly hanging her head just a bit and lifting the rifle up to her chest. I walked in front of her and hunched over just enough to be at her height. She looked at me and with those precious eyes she signaled the hallway by the right, then she raised her eyebrows once, meaning she had heard something. We don’t even need words to understand each other anymore.

I nodded slowly and each of us tilted into a different hallway. I took the left one, it was bleak, even void. I walked back to her and found her very focused, peeking around the corner. I patted her back and she pointed at her hear, and then at the end of the hallway.

I peeked too, hoping to find some movement or trail that followed that sound I couldn’t hear, but everything I saw was a door partly opened to the inside of a room, unlike all the others which were still closed.

Angelique and I looked at each other and we both decided what to do: advance, secure the entrance to that room and then break in with completely hostile intentions.

Our weapons were ready, our hands were where they should be, we were focused, our backs properly stretched, we rocked the ideal balance, without any overweights, a formidable grip, and our intentions were… maybe still unkown.

The sole of my boot striked on the door and it broke it in half. Not because I’m that strong, but because it was of such poor quality. The wooden parts fell to the sides along with the hinges and the hundreds of disperse fragments, the dust and wood

particles invaded the place at the same time that our muzzles presented themselves inside. The sunlight hit on us as soon as we looked in and it made me squint, as if trying to sharpen my aim, but…

“The curtain’s not there.”

“It’s empty, just like the rest of the rooms.”

“But…”

Angelique left her rifle hanging, although I didn’t pay too much attention because I was looking for anything strange or something that could catch my eye. Literally anything that wasn’t those stupid white walls. And then I heard a noise… a very light noise, I almost thought it was my imagination. I could figure it at all, it was a wet noise, as if a viscous object was making it. It was also followed by some… ah, it’s hard to describe, some short

groans almost unaudible, drowned and hardfully made.

“Alez, the curtain…”

Yes, it was there. The curtain was on the ground, in front of the window, mercilessly illuminated by the king star. It looked like a gift from above. Yes, it appeared like that curtain and what was resting on top of it had been gently brought from the sky until they were dearly placed on the floor by some invisible hands. That… if the scene wasn’t so sad.

“Is this what you saw…?”

There was no answer.

Looking down at what was apparently the source of all this mess, I put my weapon again without a

single doubt. No, I didn’t put it away. It’s mostly like I dropped it for the sling to hold it. I got closer, almost stepping on it, and I crouched slowly. I hanged the shotgun on my back and I… moved carefully one of the edges of the curtain.

“Are all of them dead…?”

“No, not all of them.”

On top of the blue fabric laid a feline. An adult female cat extremely malnourished that must have died some hours before. Resting against her belly were her children, all of them lifeless except for a single kitten who gripped firmly onto the nipple of her dead mother trying to, meaninglessly, get some food. It didn’t even smell, and the big body wasn’t even totally cold.

“I can only imagine… that what you saw, Angelique, was maybe this cat peeking out the windows, maybe trying to find an exist she never found.”

“And she brought the curtains down?”

“It was maybe already in the ground by the time she came here. I don’t know, it’s not important.”

“It’s a tall building…”

“I don’t think that was the cause. Maybe… maybe these creatures were born inside here, and her mother didn’t dare to get too far from them as to get out of the building and she just tried to find food around the place.”

“I see…”

“And this one here…”

It wasn’t me who picked up the last kitten alive and took it from the body of her mother, that was Angel. She brought it carefully to her chest, holding it with both his hands and making a slightly thoughtful face. The cat was also weak and almost lifeless, and it only squirmed lazily, now gripping on my partner’s fingertips, trying to drink from them. It was so, so small… it hadn’t even opened its eyes yet, and its ears’ pinna were still hidden. It showed a vaguely orange fur with white lights, it was… I’m not going to lie, its little bones were easily distinguished through its skin and it was ugly, it was horrible.

“You gave it all right until the last moment cat mama, didn’t you?”

I sighed in a low voice as I covered with that fabric again, and I stood up discouraged.

“It’s pointless. I hate saying we came in vain, but we at least scratched away a bad chance and…”

Angelique wasn’t listening.

“Angelique, that is…”

I feel like she did it hoping I didn’t see because it was a really subtle movement, but she used two of her fingers to calmly caress the head of the tiny animal. She didn’t look like a regular young girl touched by the sight of a small animal like one would expect, but the gaze that rested on that kitten was a compassionate one, which maybe reflected some sympathy.

“Okay. I’ll leave it here.”

She spoke in a single voice, and only when she was just about dropping that little being where it was before, practically letting it die, I turned around and walked to the exit.

“The cat comes with us.”

“Uh?”

I feel like I’m already getting used to her suirprised reactions, and that makes a bit sad. I guess I’m a bit insatiable.

“Maybe…”

“…”

“We have a lot of preserved food, cans and stuff. That… that might attract a lot of rats, so having a hunter in the house is not a bad idea. I once heard rats and mice run away simply by smelling the scent of cats passing by. Those animals are really useful.”

“With us…”

“Yeah. But you’re gonna take care of it. It will be a sort of new responsability. You’re gonna feed it, clean it and all that. It’s just another mission, Angelique, don’t sleep on it. Even if it sounds like an excuse to leave it all on your hands.

Not a word. Simply following me step by step without getting it all, and maybe not feeling comfortable enough to question me, she walked behind me.

“And… will it have a name?”

“That’s not of my business. I’m not even going to talk to that furball because it’s not of my business. Told you so, it’s your responsability.”

And we left.

As we walked away from that so tall building, I turned around to look at it. There was no danger in the end, but we never, ever found out what the hell happened inside of it or how they emptied the whole place like that. But… what can I say? Mystery and ghost stories are not my forté, so I admit I wouldn’t care at all if it wasn’t because I’m mad that I could never pull such a feat off. That’s it. That’s the end of it. I won’t dwell on it anymore, I can’t discover all the secrets of this town.

. . .

As for the cat, he was named “Nale” and I don’t know why. And, also, I wrote this whole chapter with him sleeping on my lap.

I let myself be tamed by a fifteen centimeters tall feline.

Chapter Nine: Zara and David IV

+

We traveled almost all over Europe to assist numerous military units from practically all NATO allied countries, but, surely due to how difficult it was, we always returned to France. I have really tons of anecdotes to tell from my time in the military. About my comrades, the many battles, the not so serious adventures, our more peaceful moments… so much, but really so much. I shared too much, and I really mean too much, with Zara and David. Should I do it? Should I create a separate annex, or maybe a whole notebook just talking about what I experienced with them two and with everyone else? It's not relevant, really. It's not… it's not what I wanted to write about initially, nor is it why you probably started reading all this. Yes… I think that, if at some point I decide to tell all those stories, I will do it in a different work, separate from all these chapters that I burden you with. I almost feel like maybe I wouldn't have done so bad if I had dedicated myself to writing, almost.

Norway, Switzerland, Sweden, Italy, France, Spain, the Spain-Portugal border, Germany, Croatia… and, it may sound strange, but I don't remember exactly which ones right now, but I know I was deployed in more states. The combat was sustained, exhausting, and we hardly had any breaks. Our forces were really committed to the cause, and that is why they did not hesitate to send us to the front as many times as necessary. We… yes, I think even I too, deep down. We wanted to save the world. We didn't grumble every time we boarded another plane to go kill strangers in a country we had never visited before, but we tried to take it in the best way we could and with the most energy we could muster. "We will take the opportunity to eat dishes that we haven't even seen before" when we knew that we were most likely going to eat the same MREs with a taste of shit. 'The good part is that I always wanted to see a woman from that country in person, so I'll try getting a wife' even though we knew very well that our contact with the outside of the mobile base was almost always limited. "Haven't you seen photos of the landscapes? They're beautiful, I want a pic there" when I don't need to explain that tourism at that time was non-existent. And, despite everything, the memories we created are so, so

many… That three or four books would not be enough to tell them all! The times we ran from stupid dangers together with Zara and David after committing the stupidest rookie mistakes, and how ninety percent of the time our superiors didn’t even find out about it! So many times I saw David fail at flirting with a native and so many times I saw Zaralyne sigh bitterly seeing mountains and forests from afar that she would have loved to visit, but she couldn’t! And so many other times they saw me getting nervous when talking to a stranger, and sneaking away in civilian clothes during a day off to look for the best ice cream shop in town, and also angrily stabbing the tents where we slept if they were too damaged so that they couldn’t refuse to change them! So much! So much, so…! So much so that I lived with those two… I can’t tell you everything, reader.

I apologize for always going around in circles, I will continue with the matter that brings me to write this chapter, but I just wanted to tell you how much you are missing out on just because I cannot delay the progress of this story any further. This piece of history, the one you will read below, is vital, I

cannot avoid it or delay it anymore if I want to continue advancing towards the event in my life that I consider the most important: my encounter with Angelique.

You have so much to understand yet. And I have so much to tell… and it saddens me feeling like I'm running out of time.

Alright, here I go.

June, 2021

Amere's ferocity in their attacks was never underestimated nor doubted by anyone since the conflict began, but their power in political and often military decision-making across the continent was increasingly unexpected. So much so that everyone was left dumbfounded when all the high-ranking officials of the French Air Force were revealed to be

apparently influential members of the so-called revolutionary organization. This led to numerous desertions and internal conflict that soon led to France's total collapse, as one of the country's three most important forces turned against it, attacking the others without hesitation. Such influence…

Of course, there's where we ended up, trying to save the french's asses again, even if we were sure there was not much left for us to do, that our mission was nothing but keeping up some defensive areas until the whole population had already evacuated. And we dropped like flies. Could we say it was unfair? Our active numbers were reduced fight after fight as we ran through fire and dirt in order to protect people we… we never swore to protect. Why I, an Austrian, born in an Austrian family that had never set foot on another country before the war, had to give away my soul and body for the sake of some french I never saw and never would see again? I don't hold any animosity towards the french, but I also never cared enough to die for them. It was stupid, but… ah, that's at least the way I saw it.

It’s quite ironic and incoherent, isn’t it? Nowdays, I risk my life day after day protecting a certain french girl from all and any harm.

With the national territory plagued with air bases of such different nature, attacks were usually lightning-fast and unpredictable, and entire sectors turned into Risk games from one moment to the next. I want to make myself clear: from one week to the next, the bases or areas located in a certain province were revealed as hostile to the current government, and our maps were dotted with green and red stains everywhere, like some sort of all-out war.

At this point, no one believed the country could be saved, not even the high ranks, I’m sure. But we were soldiers, we followed orders.

Yes, following orders, we ended up in Vieux Lyon. So rustic, so historic, so architecturally valuable… it was until our arrival. For us, it was just

another battlefield that we could barely see standing. The sturdy solid stone buildings fell like mountains of straw being blown by the wind when a cluster attack neutralized them. There was almost nothing left. The streets were collapsing with cracks, craters, and corpses, and the millennia-old alleys were covered in shrapnel and debris. Any historian would have bathed in their own tears at the state of such an important and previously well-preserved city; but I was not a historian, I was a soldier, and how pretty those floral arrangements looked on the walls of the corridors was completely irrelevant to me. I was too busy returning fire at a 240° angle to worry about the destruction taking place in Lyon.

The main objective was to try to prevent the total collapse of the province by capturing a strategically important core such as the three oldest neighborhoods of the city, but the rearming of the French Air Force surpassed us by far, also demonstrating the good logistics management that Amere possessed.

The terrorists had moved all the air defense systems from Orange-Caritat to Mont Verdun in Lyon without us being able to gather any information about it. This allowed them to efficiently defend their advance on the southeast of the country, leaving us completely exposed as we were caught off guard by an oblique pincer attack that almost decimated us in a single assault. Those Mirages came and went over our heads with such persistence… so much, much persistence… We trembled every time the ground shook beneath our feet and the air seemed to shatter like glass when the deafening noise of their engines flooded our ears. I could never forget the cruelty with which it swept the area using those DEFA cannons whose noise when firing was forever etched in my eardrums. The walls, the asphalt, the trees, the people… everything crumbled into pieces when a burst hit it, leaving behind only charred fragments of what was once a complete existence.

From a platoon of ten people, only five of us were left, and neither David nor I were in command. Orders were given by a Frenchman who screamed like a madman whenever he saw the planes. He was

so afraid of the Mirages that he was capable of completely forgetting about the ground enemies, who were much more numerous. These close combat engagements near a more important Amere node led us to better understand the type of equipment they carried. It was a jumble of international pieces, yes, but not necessarily of poor quality. If we eliminated a complete six-man patrol, we could find two Kalashnikov rifles, an HK submachine gun, a Remington .22 carbine, a PKP, an ACR rifle, and pistols of such varied origins that they ranged from Colt to Bersa. This had its advantages and disadvantages: on the one hand, we knew that they were prone to running out of ammunition individually, but we were also unable to predict what we would encounter in the next engagement.

An old home with thick walls and sturdy foundations was our refuge for the moment while the three soldiers, whose language was still strange to me, debated what course of action to take. David and I were leaning against opposite walls, in what appeared to be a living room, while the rest were in the center. The one in charge and another one were

carrying those FAMAS Félin rifles, and the last one had a Hécate II on his back that clearly couldn't be used in our situation; his mission was reconnaissance and perimeter defense in case of enemy vehicles, but he was forced to join us after the enemy advance. They had helmets with dark visors, just like us, but we were carrying our AUG rifles as standard issue.

"Hey, David…".

The bombs were falling, I don't know if it was ten or a hundred meters away from our position, but the building was shaking in the same way.

"What?"

"Nothing yet?"

“Nothing…”

On his back, the red-haired man had a communication kit strapped to his waist with belts, which he had collected from the third casualty of his platoon: the radio operator, who was an Austrian.

“Is it broken?”

“Doesn’t look like it, but I’m no technician. It only catches noise no matter where I turn the knob to.”

“Does that mean all the other radios were drestroyed?”

“No idea. I know about this as much as you do.”

“And the french…”.

“Lieutenant just tried some channels and lost interest.”

“So quickly.”

“Yeah, and he told me to get rid of it, but I’m not doing that.”

“There goes another punishment.”

“I don’t care. I’m not blindly following a frenchie that shouldn’t be giving us orders to begin with. I’ll stick to it, I think it can prove being useful.”

“Even if—”

There was a tremor, and dust fell from the ceiling of that dingy house, followed by the sound of an explosion somewhere unknown. The lieutenant looked up, momentarily losing interest in the map he had spread out on the dirty wooden table in an attempt to chart a new escape route. He glanced at both of us before pointing a finger at me, shouting something I couldn't make out, and then gesturing toward the only window that faced the street.

"Sure, don't you even think about risking one of yourt men…"

I muttered under my breath, checking my ammunition level by looking through the transparent polymer of my AUG's magazine, while crouching beside the opening and scanning the outside. I had a little over half left.

Through the glass, I could see a street full of newly-formed cracks and craters. A heavy dust

cloud covered the area, and on the square across the street, there were hardly any intact playgrounds left. There were some corpses or body parts belonging to both the French army and Amere, debris, fire, and overturned vehicles. However, nothing represented an immediate danger.

I looked at David and shook my head, and he signaled the lieutenant accordingly. Once we received confirmation, I looked outside again.

The smoke from the flames rose aggressively, obscuring the sun. It was an artificial cloudiness.

“They say something about going back to the city core.”

“You know french?”

“A bit.”

“Really?”

He had never mentioned it before, so it was a surprise.

“Yeah but not too much.”

“Anyway, going back to the core now could be a bit hard.”

“I don’t want to follow this guy, Alez.”

“Neither do I, but…”

The noise from powerful turbofan engines crossed over our heads, causing us to shrink in surprise and fear. Just after that, I saw the square across the street explode into a thousand pieces. The shockwave slammed the door violently against the frame and shattered the glass through which I was observing. The fragments fell on me, but they didn't even scratch me.

"Son of…"

Pure instinct made me take a few steps back while removing the fragments from my body, and I felt a painful slap on my back.

"Ce n'est pas sûr! On va vers le nord! On s'en va avant la prochaine crise!"

The lieutenant was shouting at me so loudly that I could almost feel the droplets of saliva hitting my

face through my visor. I looked to David for help, but he seemed as clueless as I was.

“I don’t know what you’re say-!”

Another explosion, but it was distant.

“L-look I have no idea what the fuck you’re saying but run and we will run behind you!”

I tried to make myself understood as much as I could by gesturing with both hands, and it seemed that some of my charades made their way into that frenchman’s brain because after a few seconds he nodded in agreement and addressed his other two men. Meanwhile, David had taken my position at the window and was confidently looking outside.

“Are we going back north?”

“Is that what you got?”

“More or less.”

“Shit…”

“Alright. Look, Alez. We are not going to get ourselves killed following this guy’s whims.”

“What do you suggest?”

“If things get to bad, we leave.”

“Desertion?”

“They couldn’t prove it was desertion if they can’t even understand what we’re saying.”

“I’d preffer not to…”

“Do you want to die?”

“Not that, I’m just saying I don’t like the idea of leaving anyone behind if we can escape safely.”

“That’s beyond our reach, Alez.”

David lowered his rifle and turned around to look at me.

“Lieutenant is stubborn, and the other two will follow him. Will they listen to two low-rank austrian

dudes saying we should take a route different from what their direct superior is stating? Of course not.”

The reddish cedar hairs that sprouted from his scalp and were barely visible through his translucent helmet visor seemed to shine amidst the dust, illuminated by the fire that seemed to burn with the sole intention of enhancing his natural color. The same thing happened with his eyebrows of the same tone, and with his white skin. David was a great soldier, but an even better and braver survivor. Perhaps even more than me.

“We might not have the defensive might but we have the radio, Alez. We just need to—”

And the entire building collapsed.

I remember feeling the pieces of concrete falling on me before feeling the explosion on the roof of the

house. Almost like a timeless unfolding… as if I knew what that exactly means.

The part of the roof that collapsed did not fall directly on me, David, the lieutenant, or the other guy with the FAMAS, but the sniper was not as lucky as us.

“Alez! Stick to the wall!”

When I had shaken off all the particles in front of me to see clearly, I found that the center-right portion of the top of the building had suffered the largest collapse. And directly underneath, lay the guy who was carrying the Hecate, gruesomely crushed from the head to the right thigh. It’s not like all his guts had been scattered on the ground, but it was clear, due to the severity of the bleeding, especially in the head, that the guy was no longer alive. Or maybe none of us present knew enough about medicine or first aid to spend valuable time trying to save him. I can say that at least David and I

had no idea about those things. Of course, nowadays and due to the circumstances and what I went through, I know a good deal about applying emergency treatments, but that's another topic that doesn't matter right now.

The lieutenant just crouched down to see the condition of the fatally wounded sniper and then insulted, or at least that's what I think, in a low voice. He looked at me helplessly and pointed to the rifle on the ground.

"Tu as de l'expérience?".

"I know how to use it, if that's what you mean."

It was a conversation between two crazy men who couldn't understand each other but somehow managed to interpret what the other wanted to convey. I secured my AUG on my back and picked

up the heavy .50 caliber rifle from the ground, then grabbed as much ammunition as I could from the part of the corpse that the collapsed roof hadn't crushed.

Let's say… I had experience with precision rifles, yes, but not too much. Actually, it was just the times Zara had let me shoot with her SSG, along with the tips she left me to improve my aim and control. To make things worse, the SSG is a 7.62 mm caliber rifle, and I was pretty sure that the skill required to operate a .50 caliber one must be very, very different. But I didn't care.

"We'll not withstand another hit like that, we have to go."

It was David who approached the person in charge. The lieutenant perhaps understood his intentions but not his words, nodded and gave a couple of quick orders.

We quickly evacuated the building and reevaluated our direction. Well, ‘reevaluated’ is a very elegant word. Actually, we just saw that to the north of the street where we came out there was nothing but fire and debris and the road was too complicated and risky.

Just then…

“That noise…”

The Mirages. Two fighters flew loudly over our heads, unleashing their automatic cannons on… the street parallel to ours. Were there allies there? No idea, but it was our signal to start running south. Running with two long guns on your back is not comfortable at all.

I don’t think we even covered a hundred meters before the next discharge from the planes, which

again targeted the street next to us.

“Ne vous arrêtez pas!”.

The impact of bullets on the ground and explosions from who knows where made it difficult to hear our own voices, so every order given was interpreted as just run and keep running.

We arrived at the corner, and it was necessary for us to communicate somehow to decide which direction to take. Since I was at the back, the other three turned to look at me so that none of us had any doubts about what to do next.

The lieutenant quickly assessed the situation, looked at the three forks in the street, raised his eyes to see where the terrifying Mirages were flying away to and then focused on a multi-story building on the

corner to our left, reasoning that it was our best option.

“¡À l’hôtel! ¡Braviel—”

And I didn’t understand anything else from the stream of words that he let out afterwards. My confusion must have been clearly reflected on my face.

It’s curious that the lieutenant had learned my last name, but I hadn’t learned his.

David approached me shouting.

“He said something about you breaking into the building and looking for a good sniping spot upstairs!”

And he never told us he knew French.

I ran as fast as my legs and the weight of the weapons allowed me to and crashed into the lock of the double entrance door of the hotel that the frenchman in charge had chosen as a shelter, although it was in vain, because it wasn’t locked.

The others entered just behind me, and I complied with the order to go up to the upper floor immediately, without even taking the time to memorize the layout of the hotel lobby. I only remember the counter, the chairs, and the walls in disarray, but not destroyed, as if the place had been evacuated suddenly on a normal workday.

I climbed those stairs alone, while I heard the lieutenant giving orders. I found myself in an ordinary hallway painted in a soft red that ran from north to south, some doors, of an elegant and sturdy appearance, were open and others closed, but all in

good condition. I had to assume that the lieutenant wanted me to use the Hecate to check the situation beyond the limited visual field we had on the street, so I jogged to the room at the northeast end of the building and, kicking aside any remnants of furniture and luggage that its last guests may have left, made my way to the window of the room, perfectly located in the internal corner of the hotel. There was a neatly made double bed that I pushed against the wall of interest. Then I threw a wardrobe to the ground and did the same to position it against the window, and then my improvised sniper's nest was ready.

I took a deep breath, sat down on the bed, unfolded the bipod of the Hecate and rested it on the wardrobe after taking off the AUG and leaving it aside. I adjusted the focus of the telescopic sight and only then exhaled to look calmly through the lens.

I couldn't tell whether the movie on the other side was a horror movie or a war movie.

Beyond the constant explosions and gunfire, I could see the enormous amount of collapsed buildings, multiple fires present throughout the city, even that skyscraper I saw fall as if a giant had swept its base with a single kick. And at that moment I wondered: ‘How many people are dying in this city right now?’ Military from all over Europe, terrorists… besides, no evacuation plan is so effective or complete. That never happens, they never manage to evacuate all the inhabitants of a city. Think about the homeless, the elderly who live alone or locked up, those who were waiting for a next rescue convoy that never arrived…

I suddenly felt a deep bitterness.

“That is…”.

Unidentified activity brought me back to reality.

An unarmored vehicle was slowly approaching from the street perpendicular to the one we arrived at the hotel. That is, they were coming straight towards us. Although it was still far away, about 500 meters, and they were moving really slowly. Just as I was about to leave to inform my teammates downstairs, I heard David's voice behind me.

"Alez, the french planned an escape route to the southwest, around the cathedral and—"

"I see activity to the north. It's a non-armored van with its glasses darkened, and I doubt any allied forces would—"

"I'll be right back."

And he ran down again. For my part, I focused on keeping the crosshairs of the scope on the

windshield of the car that was now about 300 meters or less away from us.

David returned before I could hear the sound of his running footsteps.

“Fire!”

“What?”

“He says they can only be enemies! The order is to open fire!”

I did not share at all the criteria of that shitty frenchman. I spat to the side, adjusted the magnification, placed my finger on the trigger, and… thought about Zara.

Her way of pressing against the buttstock, the way she seemed to kill her prey with her gaze before the bullet… I tried to imitate her.

“200…”.

“Are you gonna let them get closer?”

“Yes, 150…”

“I get it.”

I wasn’t looking at him, but I know David smiled. I heard him get down and let the van get a little closer.

When it was only 50 meters away…

Bang.

The front glass was pierced by a 12.7 millimeter thick piece of lead almost at the same time that I felt the equivalent of a horse’s kick on my right shoulder.

The car stopped almost abruptly and a hooded man jumped out through the passenger door. Two others, with ski masks covering their heads, got out through the back door, but no one got out through the driver’s door. They all carried M16 assault rifles, but they didn’t look modern, so I suppose they were of the A1 or A2 type.

Ah… of course, by then it was so different from the first combat. No shame, no guilt, no fear, no remorse. It was just one more death of all the ones I had caused and still had to cause, nothing more than that.

It was hard to do suppressive fire with the beast of a weapon I was using, but I did what I could, especially when I heard the roar of cannons from the lower floor and saw both the hostile unknowns and the van receive a powerful discharge of 5.56 mm ammunition. And I didn’t stop firing until the Hecate’s magazine was empty. I don’t remember it very well, since it was many years ago, but I think besides the guy whose head I annihilated with the first shot, I also wounded one more.

With the threat diminished, I allowed myself to release the tension accumulated in my arms and rested both my eyes and my shoulders and head.

My right shoulder was burning and made weird noises when I rotated it in circles to stretch the muscle.

I looked at the smoking shells on the ground and then scanned the room. The word ‘confusion’ would

define it very well. The wardrobe’s drawers were already open before I flipped it. There were numerous scattered clothes and open luggage backpacks whose owners, I assume, didn’t have enough time to carry everything.

“Alez! Get down here! The radio catched a signal!”

David was yelling from the lower floor. The radio thing was a surprise, yes, but what came next was worse. I reloaded the Hecate lazily, and I stood up with the full intention of putting both rifles back on my shoulders.

Then, in the same way that Nale quickly turns to see his food plate when he hears the food falling on it, the roar of the engines made me turn to the window once again.

I don’t know if there were two or three Mirage. They were flying low, very low, and the dull green and brown enamel of their fuselage was easily distinguishable to me. They were coming straight towards us at an angle of about 30° from the northeast. When my body decided to react and jump out of the window, the entire building began to collapse on me accompanied by the deafening and infernal sound of bullets bursting through concrete.

I didn’t have time to grab the Hecate or the AUG. A piece of roof — or maybe wall — fell right next to me, on the bed, and another one broke the floor on my other side, barely grazing my helmet. I let out a dry moan purely from the scare and turned around to run. I didn’t even stop to try to understand what David and the others were shouting, I just devoted 100% of my neuronal capacity to focusing on the window in front of me.

I jumped out.

Free falling from high places is curious. One feels that it only lasts a fraction of a second and, at the same time, it seems to feel eternal.

I bounced violently against the asphalt after a four-meter flight, awkwardly rotating and feeling my muscles doing what they could to cushion each impact.

Once the momentum had done its job, I did my best to ignore the pain and quickly got up, running towards the hotel that was still trembling; I could see parts of its complex structure falling apart block by block.

“David… David! David!!”

I wanted to sprint forward but a sharp pain in my right thigh prevented me from doing so. I looked

down, but there was no blood on my uniform, so it could only be something broken or similar.

I resumed my advance towards the hotel and, dragging my right leg, I shouted my companion's name with a force that made my throat scratch.

"David! Speak! Can you get out?! Whe-?!".

"I-I'm fine! I'm fine… I think…"

Upon hearing the pained voice, I breathed a sigh of relief and slowed down, searching with my eyes among the debris.

"Okay… where are you?"

“Wait, wait. Just give me a…”

And, accompanied by a groan of pain, an entire wall met the ground, followed by the portion of the roof that it held up. And on the other side, I could see David standing, without his helmet and with a red stain decorating his left profile. His AUG hung over his abdomen, and he had a lot of dirt on him, besides… the whole area surrounding his right hip was covered in opaque red.

“Ah… haha— fuck, man… w-walking it’s painful… and breathing too.”

“Holy… David we have to evacuate right now!”.

“O-oh, yeah, I had just told you…”

The pain of the red-haired man escaped to the outside through his facial expressions as he emerged from the rubble, taking off the radio he still had on his back.

“Where are the french?”

“Ugh… I don’t know. Maybe they were crushed, or they were lucky to crawl outside of the hotel.”

“Outside?”

“Yeah.”

David sat down on the street and started tinkering with something on the radio. I looked behind him, but there was no entrance to what was once a hotel that anyone could use to enter or exit. Then I thought that if they could escape, the french must

have fled inside; to some internal courtyard or to the other side of the block.

“You lost your gun.”

“Eh? Oh, yeah… I wasn’t quick enough to pick it up.”

“How bad, we’re running out of firepower.”

“I still have my handgun.”

“You know what I meant.”

Demodulation of an unknown signal by the radio that I thought was dead made the speaker vibrate and white noise could be heard.

“See? That’s a positive signal.”

I crouched down next to my partner, but he grabbed the microphone of the radio and sent the first message before I could speak.

“Cirros to Nimbus. Cirros to Nimbus.”

There was silence for a few seconds, during which I took the opportunity to verify the low risk of our situation. On the northern street, there was only that van riddled with bullets next to the three corpses from earlier. To the west, the asphalt had been torn up by the planes’ fire, and just like to the south, the rubble from the buildings made it too complicated to advance, especially considering that we were both injured. The only clear path that would take us in the direction we wanted to go was to the west.

“Continue to Nimbus.”

“They replied!”

“Critical situation. Only two operators left and we both are wounded. We need a MEDEVAC.”

There was silence again. I looked at David, the guy was very focused, with all his senses dedicated exclusively to not allowing the communication with the main mobile post to be lost. He turned the tuning knob one or two degrees to one side or the other every time the white noise got too loud.

Despite the distance, the sound of gunfire, explosions, and Mirages engines could still be heard.

“Could you determine your position, Cirrus?”

David glanced slightly at the pile of bricks that used to be a hotel and then lost himself in some uncertain point on the pavement.

“Less than 200 meters over the river. Not too far from the cathedral, I think.”

“Roger. A MEDEVAC is imposible, head west around the river, there’s an advanced outpost 900 meters after the cathedral.”

“Roger.”

He left the small microphone of the radio in its place and then painfully carried it on his back. I should have taken that radio. Yes, I should have…

He tried to get up and I hurried to take him carefully by the arm to help him. Like a good companion… no, I wasn’t a good companion. I was surviving. Yes, I sought survival by all means possible. I only helped David then and protected him because it was what gave me the most chances of survival. I used him, I truly took David and gave him a use as if he were a tool. Was it right? Was it wrong? Is there a moral compass that can be considered valid in a situation like the one we were living? I didn’t think about that as I carried David on my shoulder, nor as I took those short steps to get used to the pain.

“Cathedral…?”

“Yes.”

David’s voice was hoarse.

“Look at your left, and… ah, well, behind all that debris there should be the Vieux-Lyon cathedral. We should—”.

“Yeah, I can see it.”

At least the top of its tall towers was easily visible. Those ancient finishes and details that didn’t inspire any peace in me almost completely diverted my attention from the black clouds and the continuous threads of light that could be seen crossing the sky in search of some target beyond my visual reach to destroy.

“We’ll walk this street past all that debris until we can reach the river and follow it until… until we reach that defensive outpost Nimbus mentioned.”

“Will you be able to walk all the way?”

“Yeah… yeah I think I will. In any case, you’ll only need to carry the weight of the radio, my gun, myself and all of my equipement. It’s not that much, is it?”

That half-smile of implication was not so effective. I didn’t have the energy to try to follow his way of easing the worst moments.

In that moment I…

“Ah… you know… I don’t like my job, Alez.”

. . .

I’ve gone on for too long. I’m finishing up this notebook and there’s still so much to tell. Yes, maybe I rambled on here and there… ah, what a mess. My apologies for cutting this memoir in half,

but I’ll be returning to it very soon, and I’ll make sure to attach those next pages to this same notebook in some way. Although, that doesn’t interest you, reader. In fact, probably none of this interests you unless I write something like ‘we have our food reserves in the basement’ or ‘we keep the ammunition in the room under the stairs’. That will completely depend on who finds these writings, I suppose.

I hope it’s at least someone who can read English.

Chapter Ten: Angelique VI

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Febraury, 2030

It was raining very, very hard. It was that type of rain… a heavy rain. You know, when the drops are so big and fall with so much force that you can literally hear them individually pounding against the ground. Judging by what I remember, it must have been around two in the afternoon, but the clouds in the sky were so opaque and dark that it wouldn’t have been hard to think that it was almost night already. The tall buildings that surrounded us didn’t help at all, they deprived the streets and alleys of the little light that could reach them.

I’m used to silent cities. When people leave a place, it becomes so, so peaceful that the only thing you can hear are the rainfall, some dogs, birds… but in this city, the most striking element was the wind.

That cold wind that came from the south and gave a certain inclination to the rain that was hitting on the debris of the buildings. I don’t know, maybe it had to do with the time of year we passed through, but the wind was certainly the protagonist, even more than the water.

Hradec Králové, Czech Republic. We passed by following the Elbe River along the north side, and then we crossed the river but… but this happened before crossing it. They were not from Amere, they were another type of enemies that we know very well. A kind of enemies… worse than Amere in many ways, although they always appear in smaller numbers. They don’t have a name for themselves, but when I was in the army, we used to call them Vaterlandslos.

Luckily, the rain was as heavy as I narrated at the beginning, reader. Otherwise, the noise we made stepping on those puddles on the ground would have been a total giveaway of our escape route. I was running ahead, although the distance between us was barely more than a meter. Two hooded figures

moving through the passages that the spaces between the buildings provided us, giving each other the non-verbal signal to advance when we deemed it opportune, and stopping for only half a second to re-evaluate our path and take another direction when we heard footsteps beyond, some voice or when the screaming of some weapon alerted us.

Running away from battles is not strange. It's normal when: a) you don't know for sure how the forces on the other side are composed, and b) your effective force only counts with so few agents. Do I make my point clear? Angelique and I never engage in direct combat if we're not sure we have the advantage and certainty that we're going to win. When the initiators are on the other side, it's almost always a better idea to hide and from there, from those shadows that prevent us from being riddled, determine the power of the enemies to decide whether to face them or flee.

But, what to do when the action is so intense and the enemies so well trained that hiding is not an option? What to do when all that's left is to run and

run, and no optimal escape route can be seen to definitely get away from such an overwhelming situation? What are you supposed to do when the odds are totally against you? Life is not an action movie, nor a book or a video game, facing fifteen armed men alone while they chase you is a suicide almost every time. Something like taking down such a number of hostiles can only be achieved if you have a cautiously elaborated plan, and at least one competent ally and even then, it’s definitely better to avoid so under any circumstance.

With this in mind, what was the best thing Angel and I could do?

The clothes weighed me down. Yes, the clothes. Not the Benelli on my back, not the G36 in my hands, not the ammunition inside my coat. The clothes. The weight of the soaked fabric pulled at me, trying to forcefully bring me down to the ground, where I would only know my final destiny. Angelique didn’t seem to suffer the same as me. Although she was behind me, her steps were much lighter and even less noisy, like a cat wandering at

night, jumping from roof to roof; majestic and beautiful.

An unexpected voice coming from around the corner in front of us, in one of those many alleys, made us stop in our tracks. She looked behind us, but I know there was nothing noteworthy or she would have mentioned it, and I, aggressive as lightning, leaned out pressing the stock of my rifle against my shoulder, with the trigger already halfway through its travel, whose trajectory was already imprinted on my memory.

And there they were. Attentive, but not ready enough to prevent my attack, also carrying rifles, and even light protection, wanting to flank what was our safest route.

With short bursts but at a rate so high that they didn’t even have the time to respond, I forced my weapon to spit out pieces of lead until both had fallen to the ground. I don’t know if they screamed

when they fell or if it was the sound of the rain, but some noise stopped being heard when I finished them off down there. Angelique also leaned out to check the status of the threat, and no more than a second later we resumed our run.

We never really rehearsed it. No, Angel doesn't have that kind of training, but she knew very well that she had to take the lead as we advanced and I reloaded my weapon. If I had counted correctly, I had about fifteen rounds left in that magazine. Inside my coat I had one empty and two full ones; one of the latter took the place of the fifteen-round one, and only then did I return to the front.

We had fired. We had opened fire again, and that only meant that the rest of the enemies were once again aware of our position, so our feet had to move faster than ever. Running was exhausting, especially if we also had to occupy our heads constantly calculating the most appropriate path.

But there’s always something.

It’s not surprising, I’m human, and humans make mistakes. Constantly. All the time, every day, every hour, we all make mistakes. The only difference between you and me, reader, is that my mistakes can cost me my life or, worse, cost Angelique her life.

We came across a dead end, adorned with garbage bags and some more debris, but that wasn’t a problem, since the window to the inside of a building that I think may have been a pub stood before us. I took one of the many debris from the ground and threw it at the window to break it. Without me ordering her to, Angelique turned around and positioned herself to spy around the corner, making sure no one was coming while I used the stock of my G36 to remove the largest and most dangerous remaining pieces of glass.

“Come on!”

I jumped into the ruined pub, filled with parts of chairs, bottles, and a bar broken in half, and seconds later Angel arrived by my side. No time, no time. There was no time to think, no time to appreciate, and no time to contemplate. We had completely changed the way to afront our escape. We were no longer in the alleys where we could take alternate routes. Inside a building we could only go up, or perhaps down, or go outside. And I decided to go outside. I jogged to the front door and there was no one on the other side. I opened the door and there was no one along the street either. Only the asphalt, the sidewalks, and another building in front. It was a wide area where we could be seen clearly, but… but, I still made the mistake of thinking it was the best alternative.

“Look there. The entrance to yet another set of alleys. That’s where we’re going, Angel.”

“Okay.”

So obedient, so efficient, so relentless. So incapable to tell me it was a bad idea. I kicked the door open and sprinted without hesitation, forcing myself not to hesitate. The rain hit me relentlessly again, but I didn't even consider stopping. This time I couldn't hear the footsteps of my dear companion behind me, perhaps the rain had grown even more intense, or maybe it was the adrenaline. What I could hear, and it made me feel an immense terror that made me think, if only for a fraction of a second, that our journey was finally going to end, was the sound of a projectile going supersonic and then Angelique screaming. We were no more than two meters away from being safe in the alleys again. Yes, it was less than two meters. I spun around as I howled the name of the person who so easily had become my reason to keep going, and I saw her lying on the ground, holding onto her leg. I felt like the scene lasted for hours. The beautiful face of the angel I carried with me contorted in pain, the submachine gun she carried only staying as part of her thanks to the strap around her shoulder, her trembling hands pressing on her thigh while the water beneath her slowly but oppressively turned red. It broke my heart. I lifted my head, and there was someone standing on the roof of the pub. They also had a submachine gun which name I don't

remember in their hands; that person dressed and looked like a ghost, that’s all I can say about them. As reactively as when you remove your hand from something that is too hot, I raised my weapon and opened fire, more to suppress than to kill. They even hid behind a column holding the building’s water tanks. I grabbed Angel’s arm with great strenght and began dragging her towards the alley while continuing to throw suppressive fire with my other hand. Of course, the aim was negligible, but the noise and the chunks of concrete jumping were enough for any sane person to decide not to stick their head out.

“You’ll be fine! Don’t scream! Stop screaming, Angelique!”

One part of my brain wanted to focus on calming her down, but the majority was occupied with directing my body to get her out of danger. And we were once again only partially safe in those alleys. She wasn’t screaming anymore, only because I ordered her not to, but she was sobbing and holding

onto her leg tightly, unable to stop crying. It truly destroyed me from the inside.

I had no choice but to sling my rifle on my back as well, I had to carry Angelique with me. There was no time, no time for anything at all. I lifted the girl onto my chest, placed my left forearm underneath her thighs so she could sit on it and rest her body weight on my left shoulder; this way she could also look behind me and inform me about anything that deserved my attention, and then I ran as fast as my disadvantaged situation allowed me to.

My Beretta was already gripped in my right hand, its threatening barrel being the first to observe every corner I turned around, running while ignoring my own exhaustion and the fear induced from feeling Angelique's warm blood staining my abdomen. I don't know how long I ran like that, while also trying to pretend I didn't hear the groans that the girl released into my ear, and containing the urge to stop right there and hug her to console her. I also don't remember how many times I had to change my route or how many times I had to stop to catch my breath

and return fire when we were discovered, and I don't know how many times I circled that small town… but, at some point, everything ended.

Between hideout and hideout, hour after hour, route after route, we ended up on the second floor of a business building. I let Angelique rest on a long black sofa while I watched through the window as the little heads chasing us moved from side to side until they got tired. I don't think they ever really gave up on finding us, but they certainly reduced their efforts after a whole hour passed with no signs of us.

"… I don't see anyone getting closer, and I can't hear them either. Rain is calming down, so it should be easy to hear anyone getting inside this building or inside the nearby ones. I think… I think we are momentarily safe, Angel."

I turned to recapitulate. It was a mediocre office, like any you'd see in a B-class movie. A desk, some

slides and diplomas adorning the walls, cabinets, a coffee table, and the sofa. I walked over to my partner, who still hadn’t stopped crying, and knelt down beside her to speak as softly as my ragged voice allowed me to. It was so heartbreaking. While she lay stretched out, her left hand didn’t let go of her wound: the entry hole of a very small bullet on the outer side of her left thigh, there was no exit hole and all in all, it was rather safe. Without taking my eyes off that beautiful face that was sadly contaminated with pain and tears, and without getting any resistance coming from her, I loosened her shorts and slid them down just enough to see the area clearly, and rested my fingers around it.

“Do you think you can walk?”

Her response was just weakly shaking her head. I couldn’t blame her. Maybe the wound wasn’t precisely life-threatening, but Angelique was, is, a young girl, so her reaction to being shot for the first time was only to be expected. With my other hand I took hers and then I could feel just how much she was trembling, maybe a little from the cold water

that soaked her clothes, but I'm sure it was also from the shock of the situation. I withdrew her hand to see the wound.

"Please, try not to make a noise"

She nodded, and I could only barely hear the whimper of pain that escaped when I used my fingers to gently stretch her skin and get a better look at the wound. Such an obedient, efficient, perfect girl.

"It's not deep. I think… yeah I think I can see the projectile, I guess the bone stopped it. I don't know as much about medicine as I would like to, Angel, but I think it's not as dangerous. Look, it's not bleeding as much as before. Maybe you were lucky and it didn't hit any important veins, or… or I don't know. I really don't know about this stuff."

“… it… h-hurts…”

“Yes, of course it hurts. Of course it hurts…”

Perhaps those words described better how much it hurt me to see her so distressed than they described her actual state. The tips of my fingers were slowly caressing her smooth skin; that was me trying to calm myself down. Yes, I had to be the calm one. Even though nerves and guilt were eating me up — guilt. Guilt? Was it guilt? I think it was. I think it was guilt what I felt seeing Angelique like this. No matter how you look at it, a girl like her should never be involved in this kind of situation. It was all because of me. All of it. All the pain.

Everything Angelique had suffered since her name became Angelique was solely my fault. Nobody else’s. And it could have all been avoided. Her life could be so much better if I had never interfered in her existence. I am the evil in Angelique. I am the bad in Angelique. She might

look at me and find a guardian, but it is an undeniable fact that I am, by all accounts and under all means, the worst thing that could ever have happened to her. It is also another fact that she is my everything, and I love her — no, I love her so much, much more than my own life.

“Angel.”

“Yes?”

“I have to cure the wound.”

“Fine…”

“And in order to cure it, I have to take the bullet out.”

“…”

“Leaving it inside could lead to potential risks. It could cause another wounds, it could lead to poisoning, it could…”

She knew it perfectly. She’s very smart, she has always been. But, as sly as she could be, smartness never eclipses feelings. Her eyes… those abyssal blue eyes, as blue as the night sky, that pierced my heart, got all wet again as she turned her face down. Angelique was scared. She feared pain, she feared me, and even then… as she didn’t put up resistance when I began undressing her, she also didn’t stop me when she saw me taking that small first aid kit from my backpack.

“Alright…”

I left everything that was inside the kit by my leg, and tried to ignore everything around me to focus on that wound that, although slightly, was still bleeding. I had to remember the steps. No, I couldn't remember them, but one never forgets the most important ones and, for some reason, the brutest yet most effective is what remains in us. I picked up the ethanol and opened it up, a far away thunder could be heard after a its lighting illuminated my side. Just before pouring it on her, I looked her in the eye.

"Don't scream."

She opened her mouth to reply, but the burning feeling from the liquid appropiated all of her senses.

"AH-!"

As soon as she let out that first yelling, my free hand dropped strongly over her mouth. I thought

something like that could happen, but I didn’t want to give her a cloth to bite on in order to avoid scaring her even more. I poured more and more while she suffered. Those drowned screams, those salty tears wetting her cheeks and my fingers, those eyelids shut with utmost strenght. Her knees rubbed against each other as her nails digged into my forearm, which pressed downwards to prevent her from screaming louder. White foam came from her flesh and the alcohol poured to both sides of her thigh. I averted my gaze towards the window and, while I couldn’t see too much from there, I also could see nobody changing their course towards us. I didn’t think about the pain in my forearm, for it was nothing compared to how much my angel was suffering. Soon she began instinctively bitting me but, even if I could feel her teeth pierceing me, I didn’t stop pushing down until her thigh stopped trembling, letting me know her nerves were getting numb. I took my hand down, and wiped it on my clothes.

“You’re strong, Angelique…”

Fighting such numbing pain left the girl exhausted, and so the moaning that came when I used those tiny forceps to take that .22 bullet out from her insides were quiet. I bandaged the wound and taped it firmly. I couldn't stitch it, mainly because I didn't know how, so I could only hope it was small enough to heal by itself… and that's the reason why Angelique still shows a not-so-cute scar in that place. I'm sorry, Angelique. I'm sorry for not doing better.

The moment I looked at her, I faced the equivalent to being reminded of every evil deed you have done in your life. Those innocently guilty eyes observing me. Asking me why had she to go through all that when she had never done anything bad by own volition. Yes, it was guilt. The guilt building up inside me was unbearable. Even then, I couldn't feel any kind of reproach coming from Angelique. I guess on its place she was trying to pass on some kind of slaved thankfulness. No, don't thank me. You must never thank me for anything, Angelique. Don't do it. Just don't…

“Everything is fine.”

I couldn’t control myself properly and, after helping her dressing up again, I leaned on her, grabbed her head with both hands and shortly kissed her lips. I would like to imagine what she might have seen once we parted. Maybe she saw the weathered, tired face of a man that owns nothing but that he can see; that he can touch. I wonder… every single day I wonder if Angelique knows how much she means to me. No, she must not know, and back then she couldn’t even picture it.

Maybe it was my long hair, maybe the beard growing on my face after a week without shaving, maybe how spent I looked, maybe the droplets that hanged from my bangs, whatever it was, she looked up at me for a while.

She… was she really not going to oppose to anything I did?

Until that day, I had never seen Angelique showing so many emotions, and it made me feel terrible that such a painful event was necessary for it. No, I don’t want to live through something like that ever again. I don’t want to see her suffer again. I wish I could make us disappear, Angel. I wish I could snap my fingers and take us away to a place where we never have to worry about anything, where you never have to fire a weapon again nor feeling the fear of seeing muzzles aiming at you.

That was the second time I kissed Angelique’s lips.

. . .

The very moment I write this chapter. Winter, 2031

What was the point of telling you this story, reader? I don’t know either. Sometimes I think that I simply want to leave a record of all and every memories I have about that girl, as if I myself feared forgetting them all, because all of them, everyone of them, are extremely important to me. Because all of them show a side of Angel that I hadn’t seen before. Because all of them are, to me, even if they are not the most pleasing, as valuable as gold was to a portuguese merchant, or as foreign land was to an english colonizer.

Angelique… I’m not afraid of paving a road with blood if that road can lead you to a slightly better life.

I’m inside this room, alone and out of cigarettes. I should maybe walk around the city and try to find a closed box, or visit the comune hoping they could give me one in exchange for something they may want.

Day after day I feel worse, I’m not sure why, maybe I’m getting ill, maybe the years and the wounds weigh on me, or maybe my soul is so drained that it can’t keep up anymore. But you don’t have to worry about it. No, you don’t have to worry about anything. I’ll deal with everything. Keep reading your books, away from my being that bleeds on these blank notebooks. Everything will get better, Angel.

Everything will be alright, Angel.

Chapter Eleven: Zara and David V

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This is nothing but the continuation of that story I left unfinished before. I won't write down a fifteen-line preamble about what led me to that situation. I won't elaborate, I won't be detailed, I won't interfere.

I simply don't want to.

I'm drunk, very drunk.

I feel like I couldn't write this chapter of my life if I weren't.

Maybe I’m weak.

I don’t know, nor do I want to think about it.

The little ego I have left tells me that a weak person couldn’t keep trying to survive after everything that has happened, but the voice that speaks to me just before I fall asleep keeps telling me that I’m only doing it for the sake of that girl.

I don’t know, maybe they’re both right.

Do you mind?

No, right?

You’re not obligated to keep reading, or anything like that.

Actually, being honest, I don’t want you to keep reading.

This part of me, the one that still feels a little ashamed, wants you to throw this paper out the window.

Maybe you could… just skip this part of everything I’ve written.

Is it really worth it?

And I ask myself: is it really worth it?

I don’t know.

Damn, there’s so much I don’t know.

There’s so much about myself that I still don’t know.

Despite the thirty-something years of life I lived, I still don’t know what I believe in, or what my own ideals are.

If I told you everything…

Yes, this book isn’t for myself, it can’t be my redemption.

It could never be.

Because if all these pages are worth for somthing, it’s just to remind myself, to discover to Angelique, and to reveal to the world, how low a person can fall…

…

And how little their convictions can be worth. Perhaps Angel would say that I’m being too hard on myself, but…

…

I don’t know.

. . .

“A-ah, shit… I really can’t…”

“Hold on.”

I helped David sit against a street light post; his face drenched in sweat and his fingers trembling. He gripped his abdomen, where blood seeped through his shirt. Asking much of him was futile in his weakened state, but we couldn’t afford to waste any time. I had grown accustomed to the pain in my leg and could walk without much trouble, so I carried David’s rifle as we made our way around the block. Shooting would have been too much for him, anyway.

As we rounded the corner, the grand cathedral stood tall amidst the ruins of the city’s devastation. Its walls bore scars from bullets and explosives, evidence of the conflict that had consumed that once peaceful neighborhood. Yet, the structure remained intact, and we could see no signs of occupation by

enemy forces. Silence reigned around us, with no sounds of motors or gunfire nearby.

“Can you keep going?”

“Guh… you’re cruel, man…”

“This place is chaos. I— yeah, I’ll take you to the cathedral.”

“Hm?”

“Yeah, there I… I can bandage you or whatever. A kilometer is not that much, but it’s enough for the blood lose to make you lose consciusness and—”

Suddenly, a distant explosion echoed through the air, leaving me momentarily silent. David let out a pained sigh, knowing all too well that he couldn't hold on much longer, and shook his head slightly.

"Alright, fine. We stop ten minutes at the cathedral, you patch me up and we keep going, yes? I don't even want to think about staying out here enough time for those planes to appear again."

"That's the idea. I want to leave France as soon as you. And we'll surelly be taken off of combat after this so—"

"Yeah, yeah. You wanted to save time? Then stop losing it… h-hm…"

He attempted to get up on his own, but I hurried to help him up as I had done before. We had only fifty meters to go until the large doors of the Vieux

Lyon Cathedral, which we walked without any problems. Throughout the journey, I could feel David's heavy breathing; he almost collapsed onto the ground twice. The blood that was oozing from his clothes and gear continued to soil my clothes and soak my skin. Knowing that my friend's blood was flowing fleetingly down my side and leg was… terrifying, in its own way. We stopped in front of the large doors, but they were so firmly closed that we didn't even think about trying to open them.

"I think…"

"What is it?"

"I think I saw the door at the right open or…"

I nodded at the words of the pained redhead and took a step back, needing to do so because the structure of the church itself prevented me from

seeing the two side doors if I stood in front of the main one. Then when I turned… I saw the trail of blood that David had left behind. Drops, drops, drops, and red paths that went from the post to where we were. I almost felt myself fainting, but my body didn't move an inch.

"Alez…?"

I tried not to think about anything. I took a few steps to the right and peeked around the corner of the structure. 'Open' wasn't the right word; the doors to the right had simply been destroyed by some stray explosion and laid in large pieces to the sides, along with concrete and shrapnel.

I dragged David with me and we crossed the threshold, hoping that perhaps the interior of a holy temple, even if it was in ruins, would give us some peace. That wasn't what we found.

Yes, the church inside was a shadow of what it must have been before the attack, but there was a detail, a simple and small element of trivia that I recalled I had read once. In situations of conflict, when a city is besieged or under siege, churches and temples are commonly used as temporary hospitals. I never knew exactly why, never thought about it too much, so I would never have imagined that was the case on that occasion.

“Alez, wait.”

As soon as we crossed, we stopped half a meter inside. It wasn’t the stained-glass windows, or the statue missing half its body, or the hundreds of decorations that took our breath away. It was the sight of dozens of injured people being tended to by others who ran in silent desperation to help those who approached death. They were all civilians.

As expected, they noticed our entrance in a matter of seconds. Perhaps they were scared to see

our uniforms, perhaps they thought we were going to take the place for ourselves, perhaps they thought I was there to kill them when they saw the gun hanging on my chest.

A wounded elderly woman restrained her scream, lying on one of the benches in the church, with half her face bandaged and a large red stain on her green coat. I just raised my hand to them, trying to communicate as best I could to let them know I posed no threat, but three apparently healthy men stood up and each drew a weapon from a different place in their clothes. One was an old man of at least eighty years old, with a very long beard and red eyes; he pulled a revolver from inside his coat. Another was a teenage boy who couldn’t stop crying and sobbing; he carried a shotgun. The last was a clearly trained adult, who drew a pistol made in that same country from the back of his pants in an instant.

They didn’t even give me time to think about raising my rifle.

“W-wait you—”

“*Ne bougez pas!*”

The hoarse-voiced old man yelled and pulled back the hammer on his revolver, surely trying to intensify the threat that his finger on the trigger already posed.

“N-no! Wait! He’s— he’s hurt!”.

“*Ce sont des soldats. Que faisons-nous?*”.

“*Celui-là est blessé*”.

“*Devons-nous les aider?*”.

"*Non. Je ne sais pas à quel camp ils appartiennent. Mais que se passe-t-il si quelqu'un de l'autre camp arrive? Ils vont sûrement nous exterminer*".

"I don't know what are you…"

Should I have taken the chance to raise David's rifle and open fire? It was clear that I was at a disadvantage. However, it's not unreasonable to think that I could have emerged victorious given my military training. The worst part was undoubtedly the anxiety that gripped me as I watched them talk amongst themselves, deciding what to do with us, without being able to understand a word they said. My nerves were close to the edge. Meanwhile, David continued to bleed out, his breathing becoming more rapid, his fingers trembling, and his moans growing louder and…

“*…les deux sont blessés. Regardez la jambe de cet homme*”.

“*S-si nous les tuons… N-nous leur enlevons leurs armes…*”.

“*Nous ne sommes pas des meurtriers, gamin*”.

“*Q-qui s’en soucie dans c-cette situation?!*”.

“*Non… nous ne le ferons pas*”.

“*Quelle langue parle-t-il?*”.

“*Je pense qu’il parle allemand. Ne suis pas sûr*”.

“*Avez-vous vu un de ces rebelles parler allemand?*”.

“*J’ai même vu un enfoiré parler parsi. Je ne vais pas prendre le risque*”.

I had to kill them. I needed to create a distraction and take them out right then and there. Maybe then I could grab a first aid kit and properly treat David until we reached the evacuation point. I was going to do it. I even planned out how. I would throw David out while pretending to toss a grenade, which I didn’t actually have. If I was lucky, they would be more concerned about protecting themselves from the explosion than about David and me, and I could take my companion behind the wall and face the three of them without worry. Yes, that’s what I had to do. I even had something to use as a grenade: a flare. After all, if they were just civilians, they wouldn’t question it before getting out of the way when they saw me throw something lit. Yes, I was going to do it. I was about to do it. I gritted my teeth, gathered my courage, and…

And that son of a bitch David let out a painful laugh.

“… let’s leave, Alez.”

“…eh?”

“Yeah, we’re leaving.”

“But, David!”

“Can’t you see they don’t want to help? They’re gonna shoot us if we insist.”

“B-but I can…”

“No, Alez.”

Upon our words exchange, the three men tightened their grip on their weapons. I turned my gaze towards them, and then David raised his voice. He coughed a little while saying the first words, but then he managed to express himself much better.

“*Ne vous inquiétez pas, messieurs. Nous partons*”.

Up until that moment, I had forgotten that David could speak some French. I didn’t understand him, but it was clear he was telling them that we were leaving. Then he nodded his head at me, signaling that we should go.

“…”

I almost resisted leaving. No, my mind resisted leaving, but my body took control and I turned my back to the men and started to walk away, exiting the death trap that was the blown-out door of the cathedral.

It was unbelievable. If only I had been able to communicate better, if I had been less intimidating or if I had at least tried harder to make my intentions clear, maybe they would have agreed to give us some help.

And there he was, hanging from my arm with his face progressively turning pale.

“I feel… I’m going to fall asleep.”

“J-just a little more, man. Just a little more. It’s… just a kilometer. Just a thousand meters and we’re safe.”

“Tsk— haha… don’t talk to me like I’m a sad kid. Okay, okay. I’ll hold on. If Kyd didn’t kill me back in Agordo, some fucking rubbish won’t do it either.”

“…”

I didn’t want talking to distract me for even a nanosecond. I quickly located the street that bordered the river and started walking down it. I moved as fast as I could without running. The distant sound of airplanes, explosions, and gunshots filled the air. Luckily, there was no sign of anything up ahead, not even the allied outpost, but I assumed such an important location wouldn’t be visible and exposed to enemy fire.

I turned my head to look at the river, and I could see flames on the other side. As we walked, we came across several bridges to cross, but they had all been blown up or were filled with wrecked vehicles.

All we could do was walk, keep going, and pray, perhaps. So, I silently prayed that everything would be okay, that we wouldn't encounter any more enemies, that we wouldn't see any more horrors, and that David wouldn't lose consciousness.

I prayed a lot. Maybe I prayed too much.

…

You know? As I recall that day, I wondered if perhaps I had prayed too much. I had never been to church or been truly devout. I was not the one who prayed before going to bed or had God in his mind when waking up. I questioned whether my selfishness had been too much, asking, begging, almost demanding that God help us in such a terrible moment. I thought maybe I had been foolish to expect something from him when I never devoted myself to faith. I thought perhaps…

“That…”

The roar of the engines made us both look up at the same time. A Mirage crossed the sky right above us. I could almost say that I perceived the exact moment when its fuselage casted a shadow on us, and although it was probably my imagination, I even remember reading some inscriptions it had under its wings. Time had stopped. I couldn’t even feel fear.

When the wind hit my face, I panicked once again. Ignoring both the devastating pain in my leg and the deplorable state of my brother, I started running.

“Turn in, Alez! Turn in!”

Following David’s shout, I turned a corner searching for the entrance of a building that could serve as shelter. David looked behind us and shouted

something about the plane turning towards us. I was fortunate to spot, next to an elegant two-story house halfway down the block, the entrance to a basement. It was one of those wooden doors at a 45-degree angle from the ground. If it was open, it was clearly our best alternative. I tightened my grip on David and ran, ran with all my might.

"FUCK!!"

The entrance was blocked with heavy chains and an imposing lock.

And then I heard the engines again.

But… I'm not sure. I don't know if I actually heard the engines or if my fear of hearing them again took over my ears. All I know is that I let go of David. I let him drop to the ground so I could

pick up the AUG and empty almost the entire magazine into the metal lock.

Honestly, I didn't hear a single shot. I couldn't even hear whatever David shouted as he got up on his own, struggling under the weight of the radio on his back. I couldn't hear when the machine guns' bullets began to strike the ground, or when the chains fell as I opened one of the wooden doors with all my strength, making it bounce back on its own hinge. No, the engines… were too loud.

All I could perceive was the darkness of those stone stairs leading to the basement. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw my partner finally standing up, but by then I had already decided to go down… alone.

The plane flew over us, and the terror of what was about to come caused me to lose some control of my own body and stumble, horizontally spinning in the air and looking up as I fell into the darkness.

I saw David getting ready to enter the basement, experienced night in broad daylight as the Mirage shadowed us once more, but I felt nothing as I watched the door I had opened close again. It wasn't a big deal, David just had to open it as forcefully as I did, an action that took him less than a second. But it was a second, a very valuable second, that he couldn't afford to lose, and yet he lost due to an unfortunate accumulation of my own mistakes.

Had I stopped him from going back to the ground floor in that hotel, had I carried the radio myself, had I decided to take a route that didn't expose us so much to the sky, had I prioritized him going down the stairs first…

I felt a blow to the back of my neck.

I fell asleep.

And my last thought before fading away, bouncing down the steps was…

’…I made a mistake.’

. . .

I woke up with more pain in my head than in my leg. To say that the basement was dark didn’t do it justice, I really couldn’t see anything, except… for a few beams of light that were coming from the top of the stairs, whose doors were closed but had holes in them.

“…”.

It took me a couple of seconds to gather the strength to prop myself up on the ground and slowly lift my upper body.

One of the beams of light was shining directly in my face, and it didn’t allow me to see much.

“David…?”

I murmured to myself, piecing together my shattered memory bit by bit. I tried to see my body, but I couldn’t, so I focused on my sense of touch, and indeed, I was unharmed. I had survived the Mirage attack.

“David… David! Where are-?!”

I looked down and to the side, and found his face illuminated by another beam of light. He had his eyes closed, and his skin was already as pale as snow. It was terrifying to see the contrast that the bright blood flowing from his mouth, nose, and ears

created. So, so bright. The ferric liquid shone so much that not even his hair could rival it.

He was motionless. Not even a hint of a movement. I couldn't even see if he was breathing. I approached him with little agility, using my own hands to support me. I placed one of my palms near him, and it immediately got soaked. I could… I could feel the warmth of that liquid dripping through my fingers. Looking at him closely, I almost screamed as I gradually understood the situation I was in. I refused. Vaguely like Oedipus, stubbornly evading the reality in front of me to the point of harming myself, I tried to convince myself of what was not.

"D-david… let's go…"

The closer I got, the more parts of my body were bathed in David's blood. My hands, knees, forearms, and feet. The little sanity I could maintain was used

to focus on feeling my way around his body in the darkness.

I could hear a sound, like applause, coming from outside of the world I had created around David and myself. We were supposed to make our way to the allied post, where we would meet our companions and hopefully be taken out of danger, or at least treated for our wounds and be given a well-deserved rest.

Finally, I was behind what little I could see of David's body, crawling on my hands and knees with my hands gripping his shoulders. I could barely feel the weight of his motionless body. I tried to pull his clothes, but my arms had lost strength. Was it weakness? Had I been injured? Was it fear? No, it wasn't weakness, because I managed to grip him even tighter. I could feel the blood that already adorned my hands dripping as I squeezed harder, but I ignored it. Nothing in this place was real. I had perfectly blocked out any thoughts that could break the thread of my sanity, and nothing could bring me back to reality.

“H-hey… hey… let’s go, David…”

I pulled on him.

I barely managed to move him.

So I pulled again.

Another type of noise could be heard, but I can’t really remember what it was like.

I pulled again.

This time, harder.

Yes, harder.

Hard enough to make me lose my balance and sit back on my heels.

I let out a groan, and this time I could clearly hear a… a sound like… like a cookie crunching, like a bone breaking, or like a knuckle cracking.

David’s body moved, and what surprised me the most was how light it felt. It was nothing like the David I had been dragging with me for so long. No, it was much, much lighter.

Such a difference in my companion’s weight made me very curious, so I began to shake him very, very gently, as if hoping he would explain to me exactly what was happening.

I slowly lifted my head to see beyond, and found the same beam of light that moments ago illuminated David's face, now focused on his abdomen.

His abdomen.

His abdomen, which was not there.

The little that the holes in the basement door allowed of sunlight to sneak in illuminated a… a red mass. Red and bright. The wet edges of what reflected the photons expelled by the sun flickered weakly, like the reflection of tiles at the edge of a pool. I stopped to observe the detail more closely and… and the blood flow in my brain stopped.

There was nothing left of David from the navel down. The skin of his stomach had been torn and burned, and everything that would correspond to his

pelvis and beyond was an amorphous mass of red, which gushed blood and quickly mixed with the organs escaping from his split torso. The bone of his spine could barely be seen amidst such a mixture of viscera and various fluids, although the part of it that still remained attached to his upper half was visible above the red pool.

I don’t know how long I remained like that, still and unable to move. I couldn’t take my eyes off of whatever it was that hung from his body, pulsating violently and releasing more and more plasma.

Gradually, maybe second by second, a horrible ringing began to sound in my ears. After a while, it became so loud that I couldn’t even hear my own thoughts. The edges of my vision darkened even further, and I didn’t know if I could only see that same point because of the dim lighting or because of my tunnel vision.

I let go of David’s clothing and let one of my hands fall to my side. The same clap from before was heard again. I brought my hand to the front and saw it full, bathed in blood, and realized that the previous sound came from my body as it came into contact with the small crimson puddle around me.

David was dead.

Not only that, but his body had been almost obliterated. When my entire mind exited that little universe I had created, a terror unlike any I had ever felt invaded my soul. I ejected backwards and let out a scream that even to myself sounded gut-wrenching. The sense of smell I had lost due to the shock returned to me, and the nauseating stench of blood and burnt human flesh reached my nose, almost causing me to vomit. Pure instinct made me bring my palm to my face, as if trying not to smell that again, but then I felt my nose and cheeks warm and wet; I had stained my skin with blood.

Every movement I made, anything I could do that wasn’t closing my eyes, sank me deeper and deeper into the hopeless pit of reality in the most horrific way possible.

Like a lost child, I screamed once again, and again, and again, perhaps hoping that my screams would be louder than that heavy ringing that had occupied in my head.

I tasted iron in my mouth, a result of the blows I had suffered when I fell, but in that moment I could only think that somehow, someway, for some reason, it wasn’t mine, but David’s.

The room went from black to white with a single snap, and yet I couldn’t see or hear anything. Even the grotesque remains of David were lost from my sight. I went from feeling horror at the dead human in front of me, to an incalculable anguish after realizing that the dead was my companion. My

brother, one of my guardians, the only one who ventured to try to be my friend.

How could I face Zara after this?

How could I stand before her and tell her that our beloved friend had passed away, and that we wouldn’t even be able to properly give rest to his body?

How could I meet her gaze and reveal to Zaralyne, with only a single wound on my leg, that David had died because of me without feeling disgust, sorrow, shame, or the urge to end my life then and there just to escape this putrid feeling of guilt that invaded and consumed me, making me not even want to return to my team?

I took a deep breath, and the room went black again as the red stench entered my nostrils.

Then it went white again.

Intermittently, my surroundings switched back and forth between the gruesome rawness of his corpse and the catastrophic end of his existence.

I sprang up, embraced the rifle that once belonged to my comrade, and without looking back, I ran away.

I don’t know, I don’t know where I ran to. I don’t know because the universe turned completely white again once I stopped seeing those crimson remains. I just know I left the place as fast as I could. Maybe I went up the stairs, or maybe I found another way out from inside the house. I have no idea. All that occupied my mind at the time was to escape from there, to get away as far as I could from the result of my own selfishness. Yes, the world didn’t turn black again, but… the white never left. I only remember running and running and running without having a

clear direction, just keep moving without being able to see the street, the buildings, the sky, nothing. I even forgot about the pain in my leg. The agitation of my breath was also insignificant in the face of the colossal weight of my own thoughts. My own psyche was destroying itself by constantly reminding me that everything, everything had been my fault; I was destroying myself; autolysis.

I don’t know how long it took me to run that much, and I don’t know if I was aware of the path I chose to take or if it was just chance, pure coincidence.

The only thing that broke the monotony of my white surroundings was a shout that made me stop out of sheer instinct. When I came to my senses, I was about ten meters from the entrance of a dark, traditional bar that was lost among the other buildings. There was a soldier at the door, raising his rifle and pointing it at me with his finger on the trigger, ready to take me down as a potential threat. I couldn’t say anything, my lips trembled and, despite having regained some of my consciousness, I still

couldn’t utter anything coherent. His weapon was the same as mine, as was his uniform, and maybe that prevented him from shooting me on sight.

Another guard came out of the place and pointed at me, and a third positioned himself behind both of them and started shouting words at me that I don’t remember. That man looked back, as if confirming something with someone inside the bar, and then patted the back of the first soldier, who lowered his weapon and ran towards me to take me by the arm and start dragging me inside. I didn’t resist, I simply couldn’t. The second man tried to take the rifle from my arms, but that only made me hold onto it more tightly. There was another exchange of words and the man gave up.

I crossed the threshold and, although I don’t remember the interiors well, I do remember seeing many faces like mine, and I was even able to recognize some. My legs, perhaps on their own will, had taken me to the meeting point that had been communicated to us by radio.

The people tried to talk to me, to get information out of me, to calm me down, but nothing could even make me utter a word. Perhaps realizing it was in vain, they placed me in a wooden chair in a corner of the place, covered me with a blanket, and left me alone, shaking in solitude as I watched them with dead eyes.

If I don’t go into detail about the interiors, it’s simply because I can’t remember them. Everything looked blurry, dreamlike, fake. Only the people were clear to visualize, and they went from one place to another without stopping, without even asking me how I was. It’s not like I could answer them, anyway.

Hours passed, many hours. Perhaps a day or two passed, maybe a week or a month passed. I don’t know, I no longer had a conception of time.

Regardless of how much time had passed, a woman's voice eventually 'awakened' me. It was a clearly recognizable voice engaged in an argument with someone else. I lifted my head and saw them on the other side of the room. My desolate eyes met hers, and the older woman rushed towards me with a mix of desperation and relief. Almost stumbling, she made her way to the chair I was sitting in, and without hesitation, she embraced me almost in tears. She smiled with an uncharacteristic vulnerability.

"A-Alez! You're okay! Thank… thank God you're fiine! I heard they lost contact with you guys and I've trying to learn more since then. You're… soaked in blood. Did they check on you? They treated your wounds? You look terrible…"

Zara tried to contain her emotions upon seeing me and gripped my shoulders with considerable force, bombarding me with a flurry of questions, until she finally asked the one that I didn't want to hear.

“Combat is waning, this place is done for. Even our enemies have retreated, we only need to wait for a bit and they’ll come for us. You’ll be fine, Alez. Where’s David? He left you here and went on to help the sentinels?”

“David…”

After a long time, I spoke again and let my head fall, I saw the AUG in my hands and let everything out like a machine whose brake had just been removed.

“This… this is David’s rifle. I lost mine. We got separated from the french we were with and we both got wounded, although he had it much worse. We avoided danger as much as we could and then tried to take refuge in a church, but it was already occupied. We escaped from both the enemy units and the planes, but the planes eventually found us. When we did find a shelter, we were hit by their machine guns. I survived, barely scratched, but

David died. I thought I could bring him to a safe zone despite his injuries, but we didn't expect to be hunted again by those fighter planes. The projectiles destroyed his body and he died on the spot without me being able to do anything. Despite everything, I should have brought him with me, but…"

I gathered strength to lift my gaze once more and found Zaralyne's pale face, with her big eyes almost in a state of shock, moist and trembling. She didn't say a word before bursting into tears, letting whole rivers of silent tears run down her smooth skin. She hugged me again, but now holding me to her chest as if she were the one trying to comfort me. Without speaking, only sobbing, she caressed my nape and that was when I realized that I would never be able to forgive myself for what had happened. The knot in my chest was too much to keep inside and I let myself go just like her, wrapping her in my arms, joining in her tears.

. . .

I think it’s been… ten years since then.

And I can’t erase it from my head.

The pain, the anguish, the guilt, everything…

Still… I still have nightmares of that basement, that wake me up in the middle of the night, and I know I’ll never be able to sleep peacefully again.

Never.

Chapter Twelve: Angelique VII

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October/November, 2027

Now, this happened a long, long time ago.

If I’m not mistaken… maybe about two months, or at most three, after I met Angelique.

I can only ask you to imagine her. Much shorter than she is now, with that black hair like the night that barely reached her shoulders, the most expressionless face I had ever seen in someone, and a speaking ratio of ten words a day, if lucky. Perhaps back then she didn’t resemble a machine as much as she resembled a dog that I took everywhere with me.

Of course, we hadn’t left France by then, and the connection between us was practically non-existent. Luckily, or perhaps by providence, encounters with enemies were extremely rare, and we almost always managed to evade them rather than confront them. I say I’m grateful that it was that way because the Angelique of that time bore little resemblance to the one who accompanied me later on. The youger Angelique was completely incapable of wielding a weapon, let alone thinking of a way to devise a strategy that would allow us to overcome a numerically superior enemy.

She was, undoubtedly, dead weight. If there was a need to fight, I was the only one there, yelling at her to hide while I took care of the poor fools without training who had the misfortune of crossing paths with me. No, it’s not that I believe or consider myself a super soldier, far from it, but my experience was enough to easily crush someone who didn’t even know how to enter a room without getting shot to pieces. In short, it was a piece of cake if that was the case.

“Oh, a house.”

We continued along a dirt road. I believe… if I’m not mistaken, it was the same road that later led us to that field of flowers I mentioned earlier. But don’t take my word for it, I could be wrong.

The sky was cloudy, and it was around ten in the morning. To the left of the road, there was only open field and I think some crops, further on some trees, perhaps a small forest… and to our right, a country house. I dare to guess that it belonged to someone wealthy. I mean, judging by the size, the decorations, and all that. Two stories with white walls, a gable orange roof, some stone sculptures or something like that in front, and a stone path leading to the door.

I turned to look at Angelique and rested the ACE on my shoulder.

“Can you hear anything coming from the inside?”

Now that I think about it, I’m not sure when exactly I started experiencing hearing problems. I mean, I know it was sometime between 2022 and 2026, but I can’t pinpoint the exact date when I realized it. I hope I don’t end up completely deaf.

Angelique looked up, but she didn’t even open her mouth as if considering saying something. She simply shook her head twice, indicating a negative response.

Those eyes…

Those piercing blue pearls…

There was no sparkle in them.

Nothing.

Those were spheres completely devoid of life and reason. They were only there to guide that girl where to step to avoid falling into a pit, and not much more. They intrigued me greatly. What could I do with those eyes at my disposal? What good were they to me? How could I survive better with them? Why did I want to have that girl by my side? Why did I bring her along in the first place? And I still don’t know the answer to that last question.

“Alright… stay alerted as we move forward and tap my back if you happen to hear anything.”

I removed the magazine from my weapon, looked inside, and placed it back. It didn’t make much sense since I was already certain it was fully loaded, but the habit of wanting to feel even more secure, if possible, never faded away.

I instructed Angelique to stay behind me, and with slow and silent steps, I made my way towards the building.

It was an ordinary country house, nothing particularly noteworthy, with no signs or posters on the walls other than one indicating the surname of the house's occupants. I didn't care, so I only gave it a brief glance, which is why I can't recall what it said. With my back against the wall next to the main entrance of the house—a wooden door painted blue that didn't appear very sturdy—I looked at Angelique, who was on the other side. She shook her head again, and I slowly reached out my hand toward the doorknob, turning it ever so gently.

".. it's not closed…"

I pushed the door once I heard the latch fully disengage, and I waited for it to open completely before peeking my head inside.

Not a soul was present in that ordinary living-dining room. A wooden floor, a ceiling as white as snow, and several sets of wooden furniture that matched the interiors. There was a long table, eight chairs, sofas on one side, a television… but everything was very clean.

“Not a speck of dust. This place… are you sure you don’t hear anything, Angelique?”

She nodded once as she entered the house beside me. I couldn’t hear anything either, but it was clear that the place was regularly cleaned, there wasn’t even any visible clutter. We walked through a few rooms and found a bathroom, two bedrooms, and a kitchen in the same pristine condition as the previous room.

I let my rifle hang from its strap and brought a hand to my head when I opened the refrigerator and

saw fresh food… even though there was no electricity.

“Perhaps there’s a generator somewhere. This… this is meat, it wouldn’t last long if it loses its cold. There are people living here, but obviously they’re not here right now.”

“Hm.”

That was how Angel used to seek my attention back then.

I closed the refrigerator and looked around for her. I saw her opening a door that was different from the others, a bit farther away, at one end of the hallway that connected the kitchen with the dining room and the bedrooms.

“Did you find anything?”

I followed her without rushing as she entered what I soon identified from memory as the house’s garage. Perhaps there was a vehicle there that had caught her interest. Ah, if that had been the case, you can bet that our adventure would have been much easier and more manageable. But no, when I crossed the door with her, a harsh reality hit me, reminding me of what lay beyond the walls of that peaceful house in the middle of nowhere.

“We are…”

It was indeed the house’s garage, but its purpose had been completely altered.

Every single wall, from the one facing the street through the overhead door to the very one we had crossed to enter, was covered with shelves, cabinets,

and racks filled, brimming, overflowing… with weapons.

As far as the eye could see, all you could see were weapons.

Pistols, rifles, submachine guns, sniper rifles, and even machine guns, and I swear I remember seeing a LAW resting on top of some crates. It was an arsenal, a complete arsenal ready to arm a small army. Without even having to open the cabinets, I could see hundreds of boxes of ammunition of all kinds on a table, making it abundantly clear that whoever owned this house was prepared to take on a small town with just a few friends.

“This… no, I know what this is.”

I was the first to step into the garage, and I stood right in the center, looking around at everything with

a sense of resignation bordering on hopelessness.

Bulletproof vests, explosives, tactical gear, and electronic devices. Amere wasn't as well-armed, so those who controlled the area using this refuge as their base could only belong to a specific faction.

"They are Stateless."

"Hm?"

"Stateless, or *Vaterlandslos*. That's the name we gave them in the army. They are soldiers of any nationality who ended up, for one reason or another, separated from their forces. Subversion, dispersal, recruitment, or disillusionment. What unites them all is the feeling of being disenchanted with their own homeland, or with the world in general, and deciding to fight on their own, both against the armies of various nations and against Amere, merely existing

in this fallen world in order to survive… just because. We believe they have no motive or purpose, but they possess capabilities."

I took a deep breath before continuing.

"Amere is a gathering of wretched individuals, but they never managed to acquire enough potential to arm themselves with high-grade military equipment. The Vaterlandslos, on the other hand, are more dangerous despite being fewer in number. Most of them abandoned their armies with only the clothes on their backs, and they know exactly where to look and which bases to raid if they seek relevant equipment. This warehouse screams Vaterlandslos, and that means we need to leave as soon as possible. I can handle several Amere on my own, but just two Vaterlandslos would put me in danger. They are trained and well-equipped; I wouldn't stand a chance against them while carrying you."

As I had expected, Angelique didn’t contribute anything to the conversation and simply nodded silently. She then stood in front of one of the shelves, observing with mild curiosity the wide array of weaponry before her.

I unstrapped the backpack from my back and walked over to one of the tables to set it down, while I examined the contents of the ammunition boxes.

“While we’re here, it wouldn’t hurt to take the opportunity to resupply ourselves. Moments like these are extremely rare.”

There was everything I could be looking for at that moment: 9x19mm and 7.62x51mm ammunition. I made space inside the backpack, amidst the changes of clothes and tools, to accommodate a decent number of boxes. It was sure to weigh a lot, but considering the cost-benefit balance, I figured I would come out ahead in the long run. It’s not so

hard to find pistol rounds, but rifle ammunition is scarce, especially when it comes to 7.62.

As I continued with all the preparations, I raised my voice slightly without looking at the girl behind me.

“Has anything catched your eye?”

“…”

“I’m going to equip you. It occurred to me that I won’t have another chance to choose a weapon from such a wide variety that you can use. I can’t give you anything too heavy, but…”

I zipped up the backpack and then turned slowly, only to find Angel looking at me intently, as if she was waiting for some kind of instructions.

“Here.”

I pointed with my hand to the space right in front of me, and she walked slowly but obediently towards it, never taking her eyes off me.

I scratched my chin and then proceeded to remove the strap holding my rifle.

“Stretch your arms.”

And I let the weapon rest on her slender, delicate, noticeably weak arms.

“Hn…”

With a slight whimper escaping her lips, Angelique furrowed her brow ever so slightly, almost imperceptibly, as her shoulders stiffened and her forearms began to tremble. It was evident: the weapon was very heavy for her.

“That’s only about four kilograms. If just that weight is almost enough to knock you down, we’re in big trouble, Angel. I really wish I could give you a rifle or a carbine, but under those conditions, you’d end up killing yourself before even aiming at an enemy. Let’s see…”

With just one hand, I took the weapon back, and I could hear her let out a sigh of relief. I adjusted the strap around me and took another look around the room, this time with a more analytical, thoughtful demeanor.

“Almost everything here is assault rifles.”

And they were from all over Europe as well. There were no shortage of Russian rifles either, including some that were nothing more than Chinese copies of Kalashnikovs. AUG models two and three, a Barrett M82, AKs of all types, sizes, and calibers, SVDs, SVUs, snipers ranging from Steyrs to an AWP. I walked around in circles a couple of times, ignoring the attentive eyes of Angelique as if I were deciding what groceries to buy for dinner that night.

I stopped in front of a particular shelf and picked up a rifle with one hand and a submachine gun with the other. I quickly inspected them to ensure they were intact and then returned to her. Without saying a word, I placed one of them back on her arms.

“Ah…”

Once again, she let out a complaint.

“That’s a TAR-21. Around three kilograms. It’s still a lot?”

“…”

“Then this will make it.”

I picked up the Israeli rifle and set it aside, perhaps feeling a bit reluctant to give up a more powerful type of ammunition for something inferior. I placed the submachine gun in the hands of my back then useless companion.

…

But the expression of almost pain returned to her face as soon as the cold metal of the weapon touched her fingers.

“Hmm? Still too heavy? This is a submachine gun. It’s an MP5k, if I’m not mistaken, barely weighing around two kilograms. Don’t tell me…”

Mainly because I didn’t want to keep seeing that pained expression on her face, I took the submachine gun back from her and let it drop to the side.

The major issue was that if she couldn’t even carry that, she wouldn’t be able to handle practically anything in that garage. Nothing. Even a loaded pistol worth carrying would be close to a kilo and a half. Honestly, there was no way to make Angelique become of any value to me when it came to combat.

“… just forget it, Angel.”

Resigned, I left her standing there and returned to the table where my backpack awaited me, ready to burden my spine as soon as I dared lift it. Instead, I turned my back and rested both hands on the edge, releasing a weary sigh of frustration.

"… we're not gonna make it far like this…"

I gathered strength in my forearms to push myself up from the table, but my calculations were off. The weight on the table, that soft brown wooden table with all the boxes of ammunition on top, was lighter than expected. As I exerted some force obliquely, the legs gave way to the new impulse, shifting several centimeters backward. In other words, I nearly fell to the ground as the table moved when I leaned on it.

The edge opposite me slammed forcefully against the wall, and the impact caused the columns of boxes to topple like fallen towers. I gradually stood up, watching them cascade from the table and

directly onto the floor, but I didn’t pay much more attention to it than that.

“… anyway, let’s go. If we’re not going to find anything else but that, then we have nothing else to do in this place. In fact, we’re just unnecessarily risking ourselves.”

When the final box tumbled down, I turned my head to catch her gaze, only to find that her eyes were fixated on the fallen crates scattered on the floor. She didn’t see me; her attention was consumed by the disarray before her.

“Angel?”

“…”

“Hey…”

It almost seemed like she was deliberately ignoring me. I tried to follow her gaze, but no matter how much I did, all I could see was ammunition in the direction she was looking.

“Angel!”

Upon hearing my hoarse voice, she opened her eyes a bit wider and finally decided to look at me. She wasn’t scared, just attentive, ready to be called upon for… whatever it was that I was going to ask of her.

“What’s wrong? You saw something?”

Once again, she nodded her head in agreement, but this time she deemed it important to make it clear what had caught her attention, and finally spoke.

“Some… something different fell among the boxes.”

“Different?”

“Hm. I heard it.”

We let a few seconds pass, just the two of us, silently staring at each other. Almost complete silence, except for the occasional chirping of birds outside. Not too far away, in fact, I think I even felt like it was coming from above, as if it were over the house.

“Okay…”

I turned around, crouched down, and began rummaging through box after box. Several of them were empty, and none of them held anything of interest to me.

As I practically slapped those packages from side to side, a noticeably different texture, and a different temperature, brushed against the tip of my right index finger. I leaned forward slightly, moved aside a few more boxes… and there it was.

“This… this is what you heard?”

Angelique stepped aside to get a better look as I picked up that plastic piece from the floor and held it with a certain lightness.

It was light. Very light.

“Just maybe…”

I turned to look at her once again, and then I looked down at what was in my hand.

The weapon that was in my hand.

The letters were clear to read, and the pistol had barely a scratch on the slide, it didn’t seem to have seen much use.

It read ‘Steyr M9-A1’ near the end of the slide. I had never carried one of those, but it was comforting, in a way, to have something from my homeland in my hands. It felt like it brought me a little closer, just a little closer, to what used to be, to what I used to live and feel before everything went to shit.

I moved it around in the palm of my hand, shifting the weight and applying pressure to different points on my fingers, but… no, I didn't feel like it weighed anything. Or at least, compared to my 92, it was super light.

"And perhaps…"

To my surprise, when I removed the magazine, I could see that it was loaded. There were about seven or eight rounds inside. I placed it on the table, pulled the slide back just to make sure it was empty, and then I told Angelique to come closer.

"Your hands."

And as she reached out her hands, I placed the pistol on top of them.

“How is it?”

“It is light.”

“Good…”

I took it once again, inserted the magazine, and handed it back to her. Her small fingers trembled for a moment, but then they steadied. The girl lowered her gaze to look at the gun. The tips of her bangs partially covered her face, and I couldn’t see her expression clearly as she likely realized what would happen once she responded to my question with complete honesty.

“What about now?”

“… it is still light.”

“Perfect.”

She raised her head and buried those powerful blue spotlights into my dim and almost extinguished green lamps. I could almost hear her asking me why she had to become a killer like me. Why she had to stain her hands with the blood of others just because I wanted someone to support me.

Almost…

Almost, because at the end of the day, those were only my thoughts. The reality is that Angel never hesitated, she never hesitated and to this day she never hesitates. She took the gun just as I ordered her to. And she concealed it in her clothing exactly as I instructed. Knowing what it was, knowing what it meant, and knowing where it would eventually lead, Angelique took possession of that gun fully aware that someday she would have to use it to kill someone. Perhaps not even in self-defense, perhaps

just to shoot someone in the back to ensure her safety, as she had seen me do several times.

Even with all those times… Angelique never looked at me with fear. Those pearls always saw me the same way. Always attentive, almost with the intention of learning from me. Always, always waiting for the next order. Why? Why couldn’t she simply hate me? Why didn’t she try to escape from this life of death when she had the chance? Why couldn’t she just remember it all and direct all her hatred towards me when she woke up on that hospital bed?

Why couldn’t she escape before I arrived?

“Alez.”

“Yeah?”

Why did it have to end like this?

“I don’t know how to use it.”

“I’ll show you how later. The most important thing was to get you a weapon, and we did. Now…”

Turning my gaze back to the countless shelves, I let out a sigh. There was nothing else that I needed. I had no plans to swap out my weapons, and more ammunition would only mean more weight. It was time to head back to the kitchen, grab some food, and get out of there.

“I don’t think I can make much room in my backpack… ah, should I leave some ammo behind? But I don’t think I’ll be able to resupply myself so conveniently later on.”

As I muttered to myself in a low voice, I gestured for Angel to follow me. Not a word was spoken, just a glance from her, and then I heard her footsteps as we moved away from the far end of the room. Scratching my head, I didn't immediately leave. Instead, I leaned against the doorway, taking a moment to think. I pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and continued my murmuring under my breath.

"Food always has to be a priority above everything else. Also, water. I have both, although not in abundance, and water is not too difficult to find in this region with several streams around. However, I shouldn't rely too much on it. As for food, we have enough for maybe four or five days… eight if we take smaller portions. Assuming I take food for two more days, that would give us sustainability for two weeks if we ration it as if we were in an emergency. I don't want to carry more ammunition either. Besides, my backpack is already too heavy, and carrying even more would only cause me great discomfort in combat. If I'm going to—"

"… Alez."

"—if I'm going to take advantage of this place having such a large reservoir of 7.62, I should give up some food, let's say reduce the amount to about three days -seven in an emergency— and replace the lost weight with a few more boxes of bullets. Hm… yes, it's not such a bad idea. There's a lot of forest around here, so it shouldn't be too difficult to find animals to hunt, although at the same time, it would contradict the principle of prioritizing intake above all else. Damn, the limits of space and weight are defeating me. If I were alone… if I were alone, I should take much less food and have enough space to carry all the ammunition I want, but there's no point in thinking about that if my current situation isn't going to change."

"… Alez!"

"We… we're heading northeast. I believe there was a small town nearby the last time I saw the map. No matter how looted the cities may be, it's never impossible to find food in them. If we hold out until

— ah, of course, medical supplies. I used the last bandage on Angelique last week. We also don't have any disinfectants, and I didn't see a first aid kit in the bathroom of this house. As soon as we reach a city or town, I should try to find a pharmacy that hasn't been completely emptied… although it's difficult, those places are always the first to be targeted. If we add that to the fact that there are still many civilians on the streets of France, it would be very strange if—"

"Alez!!"

Only Angelique's scream brought me back to reality. It wasn't the scream itself, nor the surprise at a sudden noise, that snapped me out of my thoughts, but rather the sheer fact of always-silent Angelique raising her voice.

Out of pure instinct and motor reflex, I reached into my clothes and pulled out my pistol, swiftly turning around, ready to fight or flee depending on

the situation. I'm not a machine, I never was, but my experiences out there have conditioned me greatly when it comes to external stimuli. If we're all silent and someone suddenly screams, I can only imagine that we're being ambushed. That's why I consider my reaction to be natural—it is within the world we live in.

"What is it?!"

"Ah—"

Angelique's eyes didn't stop at me; they fixated on the weapon in my hand. My finger wasn't on the trigger, but it must have still been intimidating to her, as her usually composed demeanor had cracked slightly. She had placed a hand on her chest, while the other pointed in a vague direction.

"N-no…"

“…”

Quickly, I realized that it was all a misunderstanding on my part, so I tilted my head slightly and asked her to speak clearly.

“There… there is a backpack over there. If you want, I can…”

“…”

I looked down at the floor without moving my head, let out a snort to suppress the laughter at the exaggeration of my reaction, and crushed the cigarette that had fallen from my mouth with the tip of my boot.

It was quite an unusual situation.

“A backpack? I don’t remember seeing one.”

“Here.”

I don’t know when she spotted it, but she pulled out a black fabric backpack from behind a shelf, with multiple empty pockets. Without even asking me about it, she hoisted it onto her back, secured the straps, adjusted their length, and then looked at me with her usual calmness.

“Do you think you’re strong enough to carry a backpack, Angel? You know well that mine is not lightweight at all.”

“I want to try.”

‘I want.’ A word used solely for the explicit expression of a personal desire. But it’s strange, because back then Angelique seemed to completely lack a will of her own. I wasn’t entirely convinced, I didn’t want carrying a backpack to make her an even heavier burden than she already was, but… I couldn’t dismiss her first display of humanity. Angelique was — and is — my only escape in this shattered world, so I’ve always wanted to see her grow.

I left her standing there and walked over to her, then turned her around and lowered my backpack.

“If it’s too heavy, you can let me know.”

And so I started to burden her with weight. I gave her the water bottles, the food, and as I placed just one box of ammunition in one of the back pockets, I heard her faintly complain. For me, that was enough.

I removed the box and closed her backpack, patting her right shoulder just once.

“Alright. If you can carry just that, you’ll be a tremendous help to me. My back has been hurting ever since I picked you up.”

On her own, she turned to face me, nodding once again and adjusting the straps.

“I can deal with this.”

I could only stand there, staring at her without saying a word.

There was no visible change.

Perhaps a spark of motivation or determination had ignited within her, but from the outside, it was not noticeable. Nothing. No glimmer in her pupils, no twitch of her lips.

Nothing…

Before I knew it, my hand was resting on her head. And even then, her expression remained unchanged.

“As soon as you start feeling pain from the weight, you’ll let me know.”

“Okay.”

And I keep wondering: How did I appear from her point of view?

“Aren’t you going to take any weapon with you?”

Her question was more than just unexpected, but it made me raise my eyebrows and take one last look around the garage.

“… no. I don’t need it. I’m fine with what I have. There’s some great gear here, but I don’t feel like anything surpasses my ACE… or at least, I don’t feel like I can get accustomed to anything as quickly to feel just as comfortable. That’s crucial, Angelique. Feeling comfortable with what you use is one of the most important aspects.”

. . .

I grabbed more 7.62mm ammunition. We returned to the kitchen, stole some food, and resumed our journey along the dirt road.

When I stopped to look back, Angelique was gazing at the house with a hint of curiosity.

“Did we forget anything?”

I tried to get her attention with my question, but it took her about ten seconds to turn and look at me.

“We did not.”

“What is it then?”

“This house… I like it.”

And she continued walking, even passing by me and walking ahead for a while.

Angelique…

You have grown so much.

Chapter Thirteen: Zara and David VI

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June, 2021 — Days after David's death

Upon returning to the position assigned to us in France, my wounds were treated, and our entire platoon was put on reserve for a few days. Apparently, David was not the only casualty that day. Ferrero, from the assault team, and Kuenburg, from the communications team, also died. Ferrero was crushed by debris, and Kuenburg was executed after being captured. They knew because they found his body after clearing an Amere outpost. In addition to those two… three, there were many injured, myself included, so they decided to put us on hold until the platoon could be considered operational again.

The building used to be a medical dispensary that was repurposed for our needs. We used the many consulting rooms and halls as individual rooms, while the basement served as a storage and armory.

I shared a room with David, so at that moment… I was alone.

I looked lazily at the clock on one of the four white walls of the room and felt the urge to get up from the bed I was sitting on and throw it to the floor with all my strength. Its ticking annoyed me. Time, time, time. But I didn’t do it; I just observed it with my tired, burdened eyes. I wore white shorts and a green t-shirt to be comfortable, although it was difficult with the bandages on my leg in plain sight. As I had suspected, it wasn’t anything serious, but it was painful and made walking difficult.

Just below the clock, David’s AUG rested on some empty supply crates. It was still dirty, covered in dirt and blood. Of course, it no longer belonged to

him, but it wasn’t legally under my responsibility either, so I couldn’t sit down to clean it just because I felt like it. Seeing it there comforted me a little. I thought about the significance of my weapon being the one lost in the operation and not his, and him being the one who died and not me.

I left a part of myself behind, something I could never recover.

Trying to forget about the clock, I turned my head towards the window on one of the adjacent walls, and outside, I could see four fellow countrymen on guard duty, coming and going, guarding one of the entrances to the compound. They took it easy, as expected, since it wasn’t common for Amere attacks to occur during the day. According to what I had heard, they hadn’t detected any aerial movement to the north either, so… yes, they could relax.

But I couldn’t. I couldn’t calm down.

On the bedside table next to the bunk, my phone kept vibrating and vibrating. It had been like that for a couple of hours, intermittently alerting me to a call that I didn’t want to answer. It was probably Zara, just calling to check on me. I didn’t want to, I couldn’t talk to her. I still remembered, and I still remember, those broken eyes she looked at me with when… I couldn’t, I couldn’t face that again in such a fragile state. I didn’t know if I wanted to calm down, if I wanted to forget, or if I just needed to escape from my own head.

What would come next? What would happen to me? What did I deserve to happen to me? I never met David’s parents; he never talked about his family. But I couldn’t do anything else but go to them when the war ended and beg for forgiveness on my knees for prioritizing my safety over saving their son.

When the war ended…

Would I still be alive? I had never been so close to death before, and it made me truly understand how fragile the thread of my destiny was. Perhaps next time it would be by a grenade or an execution with a bullet to the back of the head. Anything could happen.

The phone rang again. I reluctantly approached, sliding over the bed to pick it up with one hand. There were over fifteen missed calls from Zara, but this… it wasn't her calling this time.

I felt the air leave my lungs against my will as I brought the phone to my head and answered. I tried to sound like I always did, but even I was surprised to hear my own voice, which seemed to have been expelled not from my own lips, but from those of a dying old man on his deathbed.

"Sir."

“How are you feeling today, Braviel? Do you think you can get to my office?”

It was Kyd, probably interested in knowing about my condition. He must have been keeping track of all the other wounded and was calling us one by one. I don’t think I noticed at that time the dryness with which I responded to him.

“Walking hurts and the pills make me feel tired. I don’t think I can go today.”

“Alright… I’ll be waiting for you at five. Be punctual, I just want to talk.”

“…”

“Understood?”

“Understood.”

“It’s just a matter of some formalities regarding your inactive status and reports from the previous operation. You also need to sign the loss of your weapon and the transfer of Vann Floors’ weapon to you. Paperwork, nothing more than that.”

“Does it mean I can get to cleaning the rifle?”

“You shouldn’t but I authorize you.”

“I’ll get to it. Later I—”

“Braviel.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Heart insisted that you wouldn’t pick her calls. Is there any reason?”

“…”

There was a reason.

But it wasn’t as if I could express it, it wasn’t as if words would allow me to do so. It wasn’t as if the torrent of words spewing from the abyss I called a mouth could explain what my chest felt.

How could I escape such a situation if not by employing deceit?

“No, not really.”

“I understand… well, she mentioned that she would come to visit you in a few minutes. I order you not to reject her and at least listen to what she has to say.”

“Oh… alright.”

“Good.”

Having said that and without uttering another word, Kyd hung up the call, leaving me staring at the blank wall in front of me, wondering if I should simply take a handful of painkillers to be asleep by the time Zara arrived. But that’s not what I did in the end. I left the phone where it was and got up from the bed, using the bedside table for support to prevent myself from falling due to the weakness in my injured leg. It was difficult to approach, but I

took David’s rifle and quickly returned to the bed, where I sat down and placed it on my lap. Dirt, dried blood, and a few scratches. I checked both sides, inspected the chamber through the magazine well, and pulled the slide back to ensure there were no obstructions… in the end, it was just dirty, not inoperable.

“…”

With the thumb of my left hand, the hand I used to hold the buttstock, I applied some friction to one of the many bloodstains splattered on the weapon until it crumbled into small solid fragments and fell to the floor. I did the same a couple more times, also with the mud stains, until a significant portion of the back of the gun was clear. I gently ran my finger over the button to release the buttstock cover and access the compartment where maintenance items for the weapon are stored, and instead of removing it, I pressed it firmly while pulling the cover with my right hand. It was a little trick we used to open that section without needing to remove the pin.

The cover opened forcefully, as if it had been under pressure, and a couple of things fell to the floor. This wasn’t normal, so I proceeded to examine the interior of the compartment, and what I found there were various objects that David seemed to keep for pleasure and convenience. That idiot… there were many candies, cigarettes, and even a condom. And there was also a piece of paper of notable thickness and quality that was finely folded in half. It was the size of a notebook page.

“David…?”

I carefully removed it and placed the AUG back on my lap, directing my attention to the paper left there, who knows when. On it, I could read something like ‘From: David, To: Berthe.’ By that point, I began to suspect what it was, as although he never mentioned it, I assumed it was a farewell letter, most likely for his mother or some sister we didn’t know. Many of my comrades did the same, although I didn’t know of anyone who preferred to

carry the letter everywhere inside their own weapon, which could easily end up in enemy hands if one were to die. In this case, David just… got lucky, we could say.

I unfolded the note and took a deep breath, preparing myself for what I was about to face.

As expected, it was a well-written letter, with a small rectangular photograph attached to the bottom right corner. In the picture, there was a small, gray-haired woman sitting in a chair, surrounded by five men, all of them redheads. David was on the far right of them all, smiling in a way that I had never witnessed in person. All the men were wearing the standard army uniform, except for David, who I can imagine had not yet joined the force.

They were his brothers, no doubt about that. It was curious because David never told us about them, let alone that there were so many and that they were in the military.

Ah…

I don’t remember the exact words of the note, as many years have passed. But I do know what it was about, so I will try to reconstruct some of the words that David left before he died.

Hello, Mom. First of all, I want you to stop crying right now. I know that if this note ends up in your hands, it can only mean that I was killed in combat, so I can’t be there to joke with you and lift your spirits.

Mom, I’m sorry for leaving you alone.

Karl, Roumald, Alex, and Heinrich, they all died before me, so I promised myself that I would come back to you one way or another… but it seems luck wasn’t on my side.

Don’t cry, Mom. Please, please don’t cry. I think I can even hear you right now.

You have always been a strong woman, and I trust that you will be able to face such a heavy blow, like this stupid war taking away all your sons.

There is no consolation, of course, I know that my words alone can’t console you. But don’t forget that you still have a very important mission, Mom: Karl and Roumald’s children are left without a father, so they will need the support of their loving grandmother as much as you will need them.

I want what’s left of our family to come together, Mom, and flee. Leave Europe. Maybe go to the United States, or perhaps South America… anywhere, but you can’t stay here. I want you to live your old age peacefully, in a place far from all these troubles, carrying us and Dad in your heart, knowing that our spirit will be with you forever.

Look at this photo, Alex had it with him when he died, he kept it in his chest pocket. My commanding officer gave it to me a few weeks ago when he informed me. Now I'm giving it to you, attached to this letter, so that you can also keep it close to your heart.

I did what I felt I had to do, Mom. So don't lament, because I died without any regrets.

I love you, Mom.

David

After I finished reading the note, I let it fall onto the rifle and began to cry like a child.

Fool. David was a fool. An imbecile. A complete retard. He never told us anything about all this. I can only imagine how much he must have silently suffered and cried at night. I was his best friend and I could never see beyond that stupid facade, that perfect face that never stopped smiling.

David…

I would have done anything. I swear, if I had known, I would have shot him in both legs on any given day just to send him back to his mother, even if it meant a lifetime in prison. I thought about that old woman who was left alone. If I couldn't dare to look Zara in the eyes, I would be even less capable of facing that lady who had lost everything, to give her the letter when all the blame for David's death rested on me. My own thoughts suffocated me, and the tears continued to wet the rifle in my lap, as if trying to cleanse it.

Seconds later, Zara entered the room without knocking, probably assuming that I wouldn’t have wanted to answer if she had knocked. I raised my head just to confirm who it was, my ruined face covered in tears met those dark eyes, wide open with surprise at my state.

“Alez, what is…”

“Just… just read this…”

. . .

Ten minutes later, the weapon and the letter lay on the floor, and it was Zara who leaned against my shoulder, sobbing after having cried an ocean upon reading the note.

“David was…”

“An idiot. David was an idiot…”

My voice still trembled, so she looked up and smiled at me before closing her eyes again, using me as a support for her weight.

“Yeah… I guess he was…”

It wasn’t difficult for me to look at Zara again. I suppose part of the immense guilt I felt was transferred to my fallen comrade’s mother, and the rest of that guilt was diluted by the friendly smile that girl directed towards me.

“Does your leg hurt?”

“A lot.”

We didn’t speak any further throughout the afternoon. Instead, we decided to clean David’s weapon together and then take a nap in bed. I forgot to go and see Kyd, and that earned me a scolding the next day.

Chapter Fourteen: Angelique VIII

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October, 2028

Those green eyes didn’t boast about displaying an unfortunate combination of anger and fear. I wouldn’t be able to say which of the two qualities stood out more, as they seemed to carry just the right amount of both, like a cocktail of juice and alcohol. They fiercely inserted themselves into my own eyes, alternating between the latter and the mouth of the gun I was aiming at them, which I held.

In front of me, an adult man sat on the ground, dressed in black leather clothes, like those worn by a rocker or a punk, with black hair tied back and an unshaven beard. He trembled in fear, shaking uncontrollably and unable to string coherent words

together. Behind him, an older woman with white hair and a heavily wrinkled face; hunched over, she cried while clutching the chair I had ordered her to sit on. Behind that lady, one could see the shelves of what used to be a hardware store.

To my left was a teenager of… I suppose seventeen or eighteen years old, bearing a striking resemblance to the man, who lay on the floor, clutching the right side of his abdomen where I had shot him just moments ago.

Next to my right foot, a revolver. I believe it was a Bulldog .44.

And, behind me, Angelique, who couldn’t stop sweating and breathing heavily.

It wasn’t spectacular at all, but let me introduce you to how we ended up in that situation.

. . .

Augsburg, southern Germany.

Not long before, just a few months prior, Angelique and I had been driven away from the Swiss border at gunpoint. They didn’t even ask us what we wanted or where we came from, or why we had weapons. They didn’t shoot at us either, they simply forced us to retreat while aiming their rifles at us.

We walked a lot, among cities and towns, scavenging for food, trying not to waste ammunition, and looking for a place to settle.

Retracing our steps and heading northeast, we arrived in Günzburg, but soon realized that place had nothing for us. So, instead of crossing the

Danube, we followed the road eastward and ended up in Augsburg.

It’s nothing spectacular, nothing noteworthy. Up to this point, considering what I’ve told you, it’s nothing special. It’s just one of the many, many detours we’ve had to take on our journey. Just one more, just another one.

Except for one simple thing: on the way to Augsburg, Angelique fell ill.

We weren’t far from the city when the symptoms started to show, but… it was distressing. Seeing her cough and carefully touch her own throat, her face turning red and her forehead sweating. It was just a flu. Yes, a flu is not a big deal. Of course, a flu is not a big deal… if you have the medication to treat it. If you don’t, it can easily turn into a fever that could become deadly.

We were moving at a very slow pace because Angel needed many more breaks than usually. It wasn't really her who asked for them. If it were up to her, she would have just followed me without complaint, walking until her body couldn't take it anymore. But I could see her pitiful state; it wasn't uncommon to turn around and see her ten meters behind me, taking slow and heavy steps while looking at the ground.

Eventually, we saw the city up close, and instead of taking it easy, we forced ourselves to pick up the pace, risking being seen or heard. It's been a couple of years now, and looking back, I can say that maybe I overreacted, and it wasn't the best idea, but… I was scared. Very scared.

We entered the city from the northeast, almost at the edge. We saw hotels, restaurants, and bars, or what was left of them. We found some pharmacies, but they had all been looted and mostly destroyed. There was nothing useful, not a single antibiotic. From the start, I never had much hope. When I was left alone, separated from my army, I discovered that

drugs were among the most valued items for the looters. I once found myself involved in a shootout trying to steal some bandages.

“… Alez…”

Exiting through the door of the third store we checked, where there was nothing either, Angelique let out an almost inaudible groan while tugging at my coat. We hadn’t stopped since we entered the city, and it must have been too much for her. As soon as I stopped, she leaned against the door frame and closed her eyes, proceeding to embrace herself with both arms.

“Just… a second…”

It was concerning. Her fingers were trembling, and I could see her lips quivering.

Evening was approaching, but it wasn’t too cold; her fever kept rising.

“Angel.”

She didn’t raise her head or open her eyes to look at me; instead, she simply hugged herself tighter.

“Wait for me here. Stay inside the pharmacy and close the door. It will be quicker if I search on my own. Besides… you’re not helpful to me right now. If something were to happen, if we were to encounter someone, I’d have to drag you along, and we’d both end up dead.”

“…”

It was only then that she cast her eyes upon me. Of course, she wouldn’t contradict my words, she

wouldn’t tell me that she didn’t want to be left alone or that she didn’t want to leave me alone. She could only look at me, hoping that her gaze alone could make me change my mind.

“You get what I’m saying, yes? I doubt you could use your gun like that, let alone—”

“But you…”

“Hm?”

“… if there is anyone nearby, you will not hear them.”

I couldn’t do anything but look away while clicking my tongue.

She was right. By that point, I had become quite dependent on Angelique's ears. It's not like I'm completely deaf, but my hearing abilities are certainly below average, which in a confrontation is a clear disadvantage. Even more so if it's just me against more than two people.

"… you're going to get us both killed."

I was unnecessarily harsh.

"If something happens, you'll hide."

"Understood…"

I offered her a hand to help her get back on her feet and match my pace. She accepted, and when our palms touched, I felt a tightness in my chest as I

noticed how warm she was. We needed to find medicine urgently.

. . .

We checked about four more pharmacies, getting closer to the city center each time, but without success.

In truth, there wouldn’t have been any difference between leaving Angelique at that pharmacy or not, because what ultimately made that stroll through the streets worthwhile was not something she could detect with her ears, but something that both of us could clearly perceive.

As we reached a corner, we could perfectly see a gray door silently closing halfway down the block. Instinctively, but without haste, I raised my ACE to eye level and waited in that position for about a

minute, hoping to see someone come out again, but there was no movement.

I lowered my voice just enough.

“You hear anything?”

“No.”

I took a step forward, and out of the corner of my eye, I could sense Angelique following closely behind me.

“What did I tell you?”

“…”

Most likely with great reluctance, she stayed in place and didn’t take another step.

I continued to move forward, keeping my gaze fixed on the center of the iron sight, making sure it aligned with that gray door. I quickly glanced at the sign above the door to determine the type of place it was.

There were about twenty steps separating me from that hardware store.

“Hm…”

I had to come to a sudden stop when I was only ten steps away. I felt my breath catch as I saw the doorknob turn, followed by the creaking hinge as the door swung open inward. Only one person emerged… It would have been an easy shot from my ready position, not at all difficult to eliminate him

with a single headshot in that brief fraction of a second when his face started to appear, with his gaze down and a gun in his right hand. The guy had short, brown hair and pronounced dark circles under his eyes, in addition to an obvious thinness that didn’t seem very healthy. There was only one factor that made me decide not to kill him right there and instead lower my aim to shoot him in the abdomen: as he exited, the boy uttered a word to someone who must have been inside the building. He spoke in German.

My reasoning was as follows:

---

a) A young man who clearly isn’t well-equipped or trained, leaving someone behind.

---

b) If someone decides to stay inside, they must be guarding that place.

---

c) If they’re guarding it, then it wouldn’t be surprising to think it’s their shelter.

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d) In a shelter, there are provisions.

---

e) Medications are provisions.

---

f) I don’t need to kill this boy; I can do something much more useful.

And so, I pulled the trigger.

Even if it didn’t kill him instantly, a 7.62 impact in such a critical area as the abdomen is…

I heard a scream coming from inside the hardware store. The boy fell to the ground, partially

inside what used to be a business, both from the surprise of encountering me and the impact of the bullet, dropping the revolver he carried. He immediately grabbed his wound with both hands, and his face turned pale as he noticed the blood flowing out.

Anticipating that the situation had just turned completely in my favor, I ran to the door and kicked it open fully. There was no one armed on the other side. Just a man and an elderly woman.

I waited a few seconds to see their reactions and then shouted Angelique’s name to bring her by my side.

. . .

I had heard how they had communicated before, and I knew that would make things much easier for

me.

“Angel, pick up the revolver.”

Amidst groans of pain, the teenager on the ground attempted to move and reach for it before she could, but a gentle kick to his face was enough to keep him still once again, without making much noise.

“You’re in no position of resisting. The more you squirm about, the quicker you’ll bleed out.”

The man’s anger compelled him to try to get up from the ground where he was sitting, leaning against the hardware store counter. So, I raised the rifle and put an end to any intention he might have had of jumping at me.

Now, everything was under my control. The injured young man on the floor, the man being threatened at gunpoint, and the elderly woman, clearly incapable of resisting, crying as she watched the boy on the ground.

None of this fills me with pride.

But neither does it bring me guilt.

“Alright…”

I let my eyes wander around the place. The hardware store wasn’t… completely emptied. They had left many things behind, to be honest. I suppose they simply weren’t high-priority items. There were a couple of black bags and also some suitcases that caught my attention in the opposite corner of where we were, next to a glass door covered with a black

curtain that seemed to lead to the back of the building.

I looked back at the man and did my best to communicate, using the German dialect.

“Medicine. I want all the pharmaceuticals you have.”

To my surprise, cooperating with me wasn’t the first thing the bearded man did. He widened his eyes and raised his voice, speaking in a way that sounded very, very familiar to me.

“You… you-! You’re not german, are you?! Y-you’re like us! We’re als austrians! Then—”

“Medicine. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

I could almost see the cold sweat running down his face.

For less than two seconds, he glanced at Angelique, perhaps noticing what was blatantly evident: Angelique wasn’t well.

“You… you can’t do this to us…”

As if he wanted to earn my compassion in one way or another, he looked at the elderly woman by his side, perhaps trying to convey that they couldn’t afford to lose resources with someone with such delicate health among them.

I lowered the rifle and let it hang, only to reach for my 92 and aim it back at him.

“Don’t… P-please! L-look at her! Look at us! We won’t survive out there if we don’t-!”

“Hand out th—”

“We could work together! Take care of each other! I-if you come with us we could share and-!”

Slowly, the seated man lost interest in the gun pointed at him and focused on the young man by my side. It was clear to me that he must have been his son. He wasn’t going to soften me. In my mind, that man was only buying time until he came up with a plan to lunge at me and try to overpower me by any means necessary.

I was alone. I couldn’t expect Angelique to be of any help in her current state. Given the circumstances, I wouldn’t hesitate to kill them all if it suddenly became necessary.

Would I have taken the same path if Angelique could have aided me? Honestly, I don’t know.

“…”

Feeling cornered, that man lowered his gaze and forced the following words to escape his trembling lips.

“We… we don’t have anything.”

He didn’t even seem to be trying to camouflage that obvious lie.

“… I offer you the opportunity to collaborate, but you squander it, when it would be easier for me to simply eliminate you and search on my own. Don’t

hold a grudge against me for whatever might happen now.”

That was also a lie. I didn’t have much time to waste, and if they had made this their base, it wouldn’t be surprising for them to have hidden the most valuable things in a hard-to-reach place.

“Let’s see…”

After taking another quick look around the store, my attention returned to those suitcases in the corner.

“Angelique, be careful and check what’s inside those suitcases. Don’t walk close to that man.”

After my companion’s brief confirmation, I heard a groan coming from the young man on the floor. I

glanced at him and raised my voice again.

“Your child is bleeding profusely, with an unsightly exit wound in the lower part of his back. The flesh around it has detached, albeit not significantly. I am using standard jacketed 7.62 ammunition. It should be possible to patch and stitch the wound, and if you’re lucky, the bullet might not have hit any vital organs, making it potentially non-lethal… that is, if you attend to it as soon as possible. As time passes, he’ll lose more and more blood, and there are no active medical facilities where a blood transfusion could be performed. How far do you think he can go with hemorrhagic anemia? That, indeed, could be easily fatal. Furthermore, if you disclose where you have the medications hidden, and if by chance you have injectable tranexamic acid, I have no problem leaving it for you. That could save his life. So, what do you say? Are you more inclined to cooperate now?”

With each of my words, the man’s head drooped lower and lower as he realized he was running out of

options. I’m not sure if everything I said then was medically correct, but it seemed to be effective as a method of intimidation.

However…

“We… still don’t have anything.”

I could see the elderly woman opening her mouth to say something, but a glance from the man made her simply cover her face with both hands and continue crying silently.

“That’s how it’s going to be…”

“Alez.”

“Yes?”

Angelique spoke to me from the other side of the room with a weak voice. Beside her, the suitcases were wide open.

“Only food, clothes, water and ammo here.”

“I see…”

Why wasn’t he confessing to me? Any other man would have spilled everything upon seeing his injured son on the floor. What was preventing him from doing so?

“We’ll swtich tactics. Come here, Angel.”

I watched her stumble over her own feet a couple of times in the less than ten meters that separated her from the door next to where I was standing. She was… weak. And even though I was used to presenting myself as strong in these types of situations, the truth is that I felt my brain boiling with helplessness. I had to heal Angelique. Everything was permitted, and I was willing to do anything. I didn't care about anything. Killing a man, killing a child, killing an elderly woman. My conscience would torment me later, that was the least of my concerns. What mattered was…

"I'm also running out of time, so we're going to speed things up."

"W-what are you—"

"This."

I bent my back, grabbed the hair of the boy beside me, and lifted him to the level of my hip. The boy let out a scream of pain. The elderly woman was horrified to see the amount of blood on the floor. The man put a hand to his throat as the barrel of my gun pointed sideways at his son's head.

"If the boy is not that important to you anyway, there's no difference if it's the bleeding or myself what ends up killing him. I'll countdown starting from five. Hand out the medicine."

No one moved a muscle. Everyone, including Angelique, seemed to be rendered speechless by such a threat. Even time seemed to stand still. No sound came from outside, and inside, only quiet groans could be heard.

"Four."

Only then, everything resumed its rhythm. The elderly woman shouted something that I didn't understand, Angelique's eyes widened, the boy started crying, and the man tried to stand up.

"Three."

They started arguing among themselves. I couldn't understand what the woman was saying; her words were too distorted by her sobbing. However, I do remember how the man kept demanding that she stay silent, tears in his eyes as well.

"Two."

"STOP!"

"One."

It was the elderly woman who screamed.

The apparent old punk tried to lunge at me, but the sound of the gunshot made him stop.

“Huh, I missed.”

Just before pulling the trigger, I raised the gun only just enough for the bullet to travel over the boy and hit the wall.

Once again, everyone remained frozen in their place.

After a couple of seconds, the boy’s labored breathing broke the silence. It wouldn’t be surprising to think that he was having a panic attack.

“Such things happen sometimes. I’ll just make sure I won’t miss next time.”

I rested the barrel against the boy’s temple, and without any preamble, I began the countdown again.

“Five.”

“No! Stop! Please stop! I-I’ll tell you everything but please lower your weapon!”

Contrary to the man who still couldn’t speak, the elderly woman decided to raise her frail voice, causing me to lower the gun and release the boy, who fell back onto the floor of the hardware store.

That time… yes, without a doubt, I would have killed him.

"… good."

Even though I let him fall, I didn't stop aiming at the young man on the floor.

"Mom…"

It became clear what the relationship was between the elderly woman and the man, who simply looked at her, feeling defeated.

"The suitcase on the right has a… hidden compartment. There's a first aid kit in there."

I just had to look at Angelique for her to understand what she needed to do. She silently went to check the same spot again, raising her head after a few seconds.

“It’s true. Here it is, Alez.”

I could sense the man watching Angelique as she returned to me, perhaps considering that it wouldn’t be difficult to overpower her. However, he refrained from doing so, either because his spirit had been broken or because he realized it was a terrible idea.

“Take this, and give me that.”

I handed the girl my gun and leaned against the door frame to examine the first aid kit. It was quite eye-catching for a first aid kit, and it looked well-stocked. Transparent, plastic, and sterile in appearance. It contained many, many things. With a

quick glance, I could see ibuprofen and some cough syrup, but it wasn't the moment to decide what would be useful or not. Besides, everything could come in handy in the future. However, as a small compensation for the elderly woman who had chosen to trade her life for her grandson's, I took out some compresses, bandages, and a pack of medical needles and thread. I let them all fall next to the boy on the floor. Then, I put the whole thing inside Angel's backpack and took the gun from her hands.

"That's all. If your kid was lucky, that should be enough to save him. Angelique, we're leaving."

No one responded to me.

Neither the elderly woman, nor the man, nor the boy, nor Angel. I took a step back, Angelique followed me, and I closed the door without looking at anyone inside, leaving them to their fate.

“…”

I couldn’t help but stare at the door for a minute, listening as someone inside became desperate in their attempts to treat the injured young man.

“Alez…”

“Yes, we’re leaving.”

. . .

That night, about two kilometers away from where I committed that robbery, Angelique was sleeping on a random couch, covered with a blanket. I gave her what I thought would be useful for her condition, and it didn’t take her long to recover.

Angelique…

Sometimes I wonder how do you remember situations like that.

Do you see me as a bad person, Angel?

Do you know, as well as I do, that maybe that level of violence wasn’t necessary?

Do you think it would have been better to try to reach an agreement instead of resorting to such a brutal threat?

It’s true, in the end, the first aid kit had more than enough for both groups to continue their paths without worries.

So, I…

Yes… the logical conclusion is that today, perhaps my way of acting, being, and thinking is not much different from that of any ordinary bandit.

I didn’t want to take any risks.

I didn’t hesitate to become a monster in order to ensure our… your well-being.

So, I shouldn’t be surprised that you often come to the same conclusions.

Of course, I’m a hypocrite.

Damn, I’m terribly hypocritical.

You didn’t lose your humanity by trying to follow my orders, Angelique.

You’re losing it because, whether I like it or not, I am your role model.

What I see in you is a reflection of what I am.

…

I have to get you out of here.

I have to give you something better.

You don’t have to be like this.

You don’t have to be like this.

Life isn’t meant to be lived this way, Angelique.

Not everyone acts like this.

But I can’t convince you of that.

You’ve seen too much.

You’ve firsthand experienced the rottenness of human actions.

But out there, there must still be a place where you can grow not to be like this.

To not be…

I wish that as you grow up, you'll be like Zara.

In fact, you resemble her a bit, here and there.

I don't want to wait ten years for things to get better anymore.

There has to be some place.

There has to be…

I don't want this life to be all you know.

I don’t have much life left, not for myself.

But it doesn’t matter anymore, my life has lost its value.

All it means is that I’m running out of time to lead you onto a better path.

And I will do it, Angel.

Even if it means giving out every drop of my blood.

I was the one responsible for ruining your life, so I will be the one to bring back its sparkle.

Maybe it will be the last good deed I do in my life.

I love you, Angelique.

Chapter Fifteen: Zara and David VII (Not entirely)

+

On any given day, when no remarkable events took place and we didn't even have to leave the house for any reason, Angelique stumbled upon something I hadn't even attempted to search for: access to the roof from inside the second floor. I couldn't find her anywhere, and since she never leaves the house without me, I knew she had to still be inside. While my surprise was not insignificant, everything made sense when I saw that section of the roof, from one of the many rooms we seldom use in the house, open, assisted by a hinge. I could see the white clouds on the other side covering the entire sky, while from the roof descended a metal ladder that seemed to have been unfolded from above from a fixed position.

Upon climbing up, I found Angelique sitting a few steps ahead, cross-legged with her hair tied back

as she gazed into the distance. She didn’t turn when she heard me.

“…you disobeyed me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Technically, this is being outside the house.”

“What you said was ‘I shouldn’t leave the perimeter of the house,’ so technically, I didn’t violate the order.”

“Uh…”

Only this made her turn slightly to look at me with a lazy smile.

“It’s a nice spot. We could come up here to eat every now and then.”

“We would be exposing ourselves too much. In fact, we are doing that right now.”

“… yes, I guess… yes, this is something we can’t do either.”

Although her smile didn’t fade, I could still detect a hint of sorrow in her gaze when her idea was rejected. I can’t blame her. We can hardly enjoy anything at all, Angel. I owe you an apology for that as well.

“…let’s go back inside. I found an interesting book. It was inside one of the drawers in the closet in my room, as if someone had tucked it away to read later.”

“What is it about?”

“A dystopian world. In it, people don’t have the freedom to do what they want or pursue what they prefer. Based on circumstances imposed against their will, they have a limited range of actions they can take if they don’t want their entire life to fall apart. There are unspoken rules and codes that must be strictly followed if you want to live more or less peacefully.”

“…that’s how we live.”

“…”

“…right?”

“Yes, that’s how we live.”

“Then, I don’t want to read it.”

“Why not?”

“…”

“Angelique… come with me.”

“Is it an order?”

“No, it’s not. I just… want you close.”

“Alright, then…”

I reached out an arm towards her, almost begging her to please join her hand with mine, to offer me, even if just for a few seconds, that warmth in the tips of her fingers that has the power to soothe even my worst nervous episodes.

February 17, 2022

“No get too drunk, okay?”

“We can’t drink here, Mom.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

“Do you see me as someone who can’t follow orders?”

“You used to skip classes whenever you could without telling me, even though you knew I would have covered for you if you had asked.”

“…”

“You like breaking the rules, son.”

“It’s not that, it’s…”

“Yes, you like breaking the rules. You’ve always been like that, since you were a child. You never did anything too serious because you were never a bad kid. But if the sign said don’t step on the grass, you would go and step on it.”

“Sounds like I was a handful to take care of.”

“No, you weren’t. Because if you saw someone lying down, you helped them get up without me telling you. You just… didn’t like being told what to do.”

“…”

“Don’t lose that, Alez.”

“You’re not here, Mom. If I don’t follow orders, I’m going to have a hard time.”

“You didn’t care if we punished you either, did you?”

“Oh, that’s true too…”

“Take care of yourself, son.”

“You two should take care. Have you decided what to do?”

“I let you convince me to leave, and I was able to convince your father. We had a fight, so we’re not together right now, but—”

“Yeah, I talked to him a while ago.”

“Well, that. We have a date…”

“…”

“… in four days, our flight leaves from Graz.”

“To where?”

“Tenerife.”

“And then?”

“Then… we’ll decide what to do there. We’ll probably stop in the United States, even if it’s just for a few weeks.”

“How are things over there?”

“Fine. There have been some upheavals, but they were controlled. Europe is the only problematic region right now.”

“So…”

“Your father said he has acquaintances in some South American countries. Something from… Peru or Uruguay. We still have to decide.”

“You can take it easy once you’re in America.”

“Son—”

“Yeah, I’ll follow you when things calm down. I don’t know how it’s going to end, but I can at least tell you that for now, the situation is… under control. If everything goes to shit, I’ll find a way to migrate to America with you.”

“Son…”

“I’ll be fine. Also, I don’t know if you’ve been watching the news, but—”

“I watch them every hour.”

“Well, there are regions that haven’t been compromised. The other day I was talking to an officer from our brigade, and he told me that an arrangement is being processed between the two countries to send those who have been left out of combat to Switzerland. Maybe in the future, those who have fulfilled a certain quota will also be sent. In that case…”

“As long as you can be okay, I’ll be happy.”

“I think the same of you, Mom.”

“I just ask you to be c—”

“Mom, it’s getting late. The head of the security service should show up at any moment, and if he sees me…”

“Yes, I understand. Well, take care a lot, Alez. Try to rest when you can.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. See you.”

“I love you, son.”

“And I love you both.”

I hung up and immediately turned off my phone. Then, I stayed silent, staring at the darkened screen while swallowing the lump in my throat. We were both so honest, yet we both lied to each other a lot. I

just wanted them to be okay, and they just wanted me to be okay, but I knew Amere sometimes tried to shoot down civilian evacuation flights, and they knew that being on the front meant being on the brink of death every day.

I stowed the phone and rose from the rock I was sitting on, shouldering the AUG that once belonged to David. I let out a sigh, and as I was about to embark on another nighttime patrol around the small region of the forest where I was on guard duty, I heard footsteps behind me. When I turned, I was met with the beautiful smile of a person approaching slowly.

“I just took over Sick’s shift, but you shouldn’t be here tonight, Alez.”

“There wouldn’t have been much difference if I was on duty or not.”

“You say that because you’re a bitter person.”

“Or maybe you care very little about things.”

“That’s mean. There are things I care about; I just know how to give them a different priority order.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“You’re going to end up dying without having taken it easy for a single day, Alez.”

I clicked my tongue. David had told me something similar once, so I felt defeated hearing it again, this time from Zara’s lips.

“Alez.”

“What?”

“Happy birthday.”

“Za-.”

I couldn’t finish uttering a single word before that girl hugged me tightly around the neck. I let it linger for a moment, but inevitably, I ended up embracing her too.

“Thank you, thank you… now, let’s continue with this before Kyd or someone else shows up.”

“Whatever you want. Are you going for another round?”

“Yes, I was just about to take another walk around the forest…”

“I’ve got four flasks of liquor hidden in my clothes.”

“You’re going to get us in trouble.”

We weren’t punished, but it wasn’t easy to conceal the drunkenness once we returned from the outing.

That birthday…

…

I miss Zara a lot…

The moment I’m writing this

Angelique entered my room abruptly. She didn’t knock on the door. It’s not that it bothers me, nor does it surprise me, since I was the one who never told her she had to do such a thing.

She informed me that she spotted some activity to the west, so we both grabbed our weapons and headed towards the corner of the house that would give us a better view of that area. It’s an almost empty room, like many others, which at first glance looks like a hotel room that has been unused for decades. We placed the nightstand near the window, and on it, I positioned my AWP, the only rifle of its kind that we have. Not because I planned to shoot anyone passing by, but because the built-in telescopic sight makes things easier for me, as replacement for a good pair of binoculars. One day I’ll tell you how I acquired that rifle.

“They were far away. About fifteen blocks or so. No-.”

“Yes, I see them. They’re walking slowly; right now, they’re about 1200 meters away.”

“Amere?”

“No, they’re not Amere…”

“Then?”

“Stateless. There are four of them. Two with machine guns and the others with assault rifles. They all look very… heavily equipped. They’re wearing plate carriers, all of them. They must be new, maybe just out of their base.”

“We haven’t had any conflicts with them for a long time. Maybe… they’ve set up a new outpost nearby.”

“I don’t know, but it’s not impossible. I really hope not. If that’s the case, we’ll have to move. I won’t face these guys on a daily basis.”

“I should…”

“You shouldn’t do anything.”

“Hm?”

“I don’t want to confront them. If there’s a real possibility that they’re new recruits making sure their new assigned area is secure, then drawing their attention will only make them run back to report it to their superiors. Considering the level of equipment

these guys have… we'll have, at most, an hour to escape if they come after us."

"What should we do, Alez?"

"… I don't know."

As the four strangers approached, walking down that wide street which, unfortunately, bordered the main entrance to our home, I adjusted the scope on my rifle to never lose sight of them. Yes, there were four, but when it came to Vaterlandslos, facing them felt as if you were up against twelve members of Amere. To this day, I don't know if it's because the members of Amere are too foolish, or if the Stateless are exceptionally well-trained.

"You can kill them."

“What?”

“You can kill them, Alez. If you finish them off before they get too close, we’d get rid of a big problem. We could even make a quick getaway to collect their equipment and hide their bodies. If they are new recruits, their superiors might think they fled, and-.”

“Angel.”

“…”

“You must hold me in high regard if you think I could take out four men quickly enough before they have a chance to hide and then disappear among the buildings.”

“Huh…”

I’m perfectly aware that Angelique lacks experience; I only concern myself with pointing out her own lapses in reasoning without trying to sound like I’m giving her a lesson. I want her to become aware of those things on her own. I want…

I want so many, many things.

“So…”

“That’s right, all we can do is wait. Wait and… maybe pray that they decide to turn around and not come back. Angelique, whatever happens after this, I want you to prepare your backpack to-.”

“Escape.”

“—to get away from here at any moment. I don’t need to tell you what to bring; you know well enough. I really hoped to stay here for much longer, but there are enemies it’s better to flee from…”

“I understand.”

There was a hint of nervousness in her voice. Both she and I were somewhat reluctant to stay and live in this… mansion, though for different reasons. That said, we both adjusted perfectly to this life. We are comfortable. We enjoy waking up early and checking how much gas and food we have left. We relish waking each other up when one of us oversleeps. We take pleasure in our daily tasks. She enjoys going down to the basement to let me know that the meal is ready, and I enjoy taking the book from her hands to tell her it’s time to sleep. We enjoy. We enjoy each other.

“They stopped.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

The four men came to a halt. They all looked to their left, still about nine hundred meters from our position. Only two of them raised their weapons, ready to face whatever they encountered. Out of sheer habit, I could memorize what they carried: two of them had an extremely similar rifle model, some variant of the M4. The other two differed, one carrying an MG5 and the other a MAG 58.

“They’re… seeing something. No, I think one of them heard something. I’m not very sure. No, I am sure. The one at the corner heard something and alerted the others; now he’s signalling towards a specific house and— shit!”

“What happened?”

I saw it all through the scope.

Seven or eight bandits emerged from all directions. The Stateless were mercilessly gunned down, and even though the plates saved some of them, the bandits approached and finished them off with shots to the head. It was impressive, considering that all the bandits carried only pistols. And like disgusting, filthy cockroaches, they took the weapons from the Stateless and everything they had in their pockets, then disappeared… it all happened in seconds.

For some reason, I was stunned.

It was strange.

How many times had Angelique and I done something similar? However, seeing it from the

outside was… it was hell. Like a cheap movie, I saw four lives fade away as if they were nothing. With a past, with a purpose, with certain aspirations… and now, nothing. The bandits revelled for just a couple of seconds before disappearing among the houses, each going in a different direction. And all of that… less than a kilometre away from us. Angelique wasn't looking out the window; she was looking at me as I finished processing it. Truly, how… how fragile, volatile the world we live in is. Nothing can assure us that Angelique and I won't be next.

For just a fraction of a second, a paralyzing fear overwhelmed me. I pictured Angel and me being gunned down in that way, and everything around me turned gray.

"Alez…?"

Her voice brought me back, and I stopped peering through the scope to look at her.

“… everything is fine, Angelique.”

“Eh?”

“Yes, everything is fine. We’re out of danger.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You don’t have to understand, just-.”

“I want to understand, what is-?”

Before she could finish that question, I set my rifle aside and leaned over her, enveloping her with both arms as if not to allow her to escape ever. Such a hug lasted no more than two seconds; soon, I let her go.

“…”

“…”

“Alez…?”

“Everything is fine. Those Stateless won’t come any closer.”

“I heard shots.”

Exactly, they won’t bother us anymore.”

“Alez…”

“They won’t bother us, Angelique. Everything will continue as it has until today. We’ll focus on keeping the bandits at bay. They know we’re here, but each one individually values their own life enough not to come close, so…”

“…”

“We’re safe.”

I never expected to experience a situation like that, but Angelique approached me and… took my face in both hands. She came close enough that even a whisper sounded like a shout, and despite the height difference, she made her voice prevail over my ears more than even my own thoughts.

“We’re going to be okay.”

What foolish words. What did she mean by that? Of course, we'll be fine. We have more than enough escape plans for almost any situation. Nothing could catch us off guard. Of course… of course, we'll be fine. It just makes me wonder: What has she seen in me that I'm not able to express in these words?

Damn, I'm terrified. Everything is so uncertain. I can't determine if staying here was a success or a mistake.

"Yes… yes, we're going to be okay."

It's almost as if we both know that was a lie. We both believe in each other. But neither of us believes in the world around us. Angel, you deserve something much, much better than this.

. . .

I forgot what it was that I wanted to write about. I know I had something in mind, a specific story about my past, but I can’t remember which one exactly…

Ah…

I apologize; I can’t recall.

Any excuse I give will sound nothing more than a lie.

. . .

Hey, reader, under what circumstances are you reading this? Did you find my writings among the remnants of my room after you killed me?, Or perhaps you stumbled upon them abandoned in the house after we were forced to leave? Or… maybe,

are you reading this from the comfort of your room while I'm still out there fighting? All those options are possible, and letting your imagination run wild is so, so much fun…

A few chapters ago, I said that maybe I wouldn't have done so badly as a writer, but… right now, I think I would have done terribly. I don't know how to make an audience empathize with my characters or make people interested in what I tell… I just tell stories. This is me, and this is Angelique.

There's nothing more to it, really.

You shouldn't keep reading.

There's… there's nothing more interesting waiting ahead.

It’s just me, it’s just Angelique…

It’s just the two of us, describing the world before us.

No story worthy of a hero adorned with medals awaits beyond these pages.

Chapter Sixteen: Angelique IX

+

April, 2031

“No, it’s the other way around.”

“Oh, so, first goes… first…”

“Yes, first you press the button, then you turn the… yes, just like that. That unlocks the slide, and now—”

“It came out.”

“Yes, it came out. Be careful with the spring.”

“This one?”

“Yes, that one. Well, it’s not like it could hurt you, but it has enough energy to free itself, and you might never recover it. It’s small and easily—”

“It could fall into a drain or something.”

“… yes, exactly.”

“What do you recommend?”

“Use your right palm to hold the back of the frame, while using your thumb and index finger to release the spring. At the same time, you can use your left hand like a tent to prevent any mishap if it decides to fly out.”

“Oh…”

“All right. You did it right. With the spring discharged of elastic energy, you can—”

“I have a question.”

“… what is it?”

“Why…”

Angelique lifted her head and looked into my eyes. By now, I’m sure it’s thanks to experience, but I can sense all the curiosity hidden behind those undisturbed blue orbes. The impending question didn’t carry critical importance, and answering it wasn’t absolutely necessary for our survival.

Angelique was just asking because… she was curious, because she's a curious girl.

"Why are you teaching me to disassemble your gun before teaching me to disassemble mine?"

On the worktable in front of Angelique, who was wearing blue overalls we found in the house, my 92 lay partially disassembled. It was she who took care of removing part by part, while I just observed and corrected with… patience, I want to believe.

It was the basement/armory, the one I once described to you before; I won't do it again.

"… it's not for anything too special."

"Then?"

“Mine is… just slightly more complicated to disassemble. Actually, barely more complicated, but I feel that if you learn with this one first, it will be much easier for you when you have to practice with yours.”

“…”

“What do you think?”

“That you’re teaching me things in reverse.”

“Why?”

“Following that logic, shouldn’t you first teach me to disassemble one of your rifles? If they are

much more complex, then disassembling the pistol would be—”

“Angel.”

She fell silent.

I knew… I know she doesn’t do it on purpose, so I have to do my best to feel like she’s not pulling my leg.

Like the good and only adult present, I breathe slowly and prepare a response in my head that fits the situation.

“The difference is that the pistol and the rifle are very, very different weapons. They may share certain essential elements, but the disassembly is not comparable at all. On the other hand, your pistol and

mine have many similarities when it comes to maintenance, so it makes sense that you can deal with both by simply memorizing how one of them works."

She remained silent.

For a few seconds, she buried those eyes on me and made me want to hide behind the wall, but then she lowered her gaze to the desk and continued inspecting the parts of my Beretta.

"I understand…"

I'm thankful that she's so pragmatic.

"Write down everything I tell you and review it from time to time; I'll bombard you with questions until you remember every part by heart."

“Understood…”

“And if a part falls to the floor, you’ll have to run two laps around the block.”

“… huh?”

Angelique didn’t look at me worried; rather, she looked at me puzzled. I could almost feel her pupils hinting that she believed I had gone crazy.

“… nothing, it’s nothing.”

Just memories, just that.

“Seriously, though, I really ask you to try to remember this. Being able to maintain your own and my weapons would be a huge help, and it would take a big burden off me. I’m going to the kitchen, do you want anything?”

“Water.”

“Okay. In the meantime, write down what I told you.”

. . .

The water bottles we have on the many shelves in the kitchen are pre-boiled, ready to be consumed whenever we want. Of course, one would prefer to have cold water to drink, but the generator we have in the other basement operates on gas, and we can’t afford to spend enough to keep the refrigerator on twenty-four hours. We use the generator only for

lights or when we need to preserve meat for the next day. I grabbed a glass bottle to bring to Angelique and unwrapped for myself a roll of bread that Angelique and I attempted to make based on a book we read together. Sure, we were missing half of the ingredients, and the taste isn't… the best, but at least it serves to deceive the stomach.

"…"

It's horrible.

I don't fully understand why, but Angelique likes it.

To Angelique…

Before going back to the basement, I stopped for a moment to look around.

The kitchen, and also the dining room, looked… welcoming. Little of what was there provided hospitality. Maybe the marks on the sofa, or maybe the books on the table, or maybe the cat sleeping on one of the chairs… no, none of that offers hospitality; those are just signs of life.

If I want to be objective, I can only say that our house exudes hostility from every opening. Every curve designed as cover, and every escape route planned according to the situation. Everything hides intentions so sad, and yet… for us, it’s a home. It’s already a habit to sit on that sofa and waste time as night falls, taking turns petting the cat while he tries to escape. If it’s difficult for me to imagine the lamentable moment when we have to flee, then for Angelique…

Maybe she doesn’t care.

I don’t know.

Despite the years, she remains very difficult to read. It's curious, but at this point, it's easier to ask her what she's thinking than to try to guess her intentions.

Angelique, you've grown a lot, but you haven't grown at all.

. . .

I felt strange looking down at my own feet with that bottle in my hands, like an old man yearning for a time that never existed. I chuckled to myself, and soon I headed back to the basement, but as I descended…

Angelique was holding the 92 in her hands, fully assembled. She had managed to put it together on her own, and that was admirable, but it wasn't

exactly what drew my attention at that moment, but rather… her gaze.

Her… those precious clear eyes wandered back and forth over the pistol, not with any kind of longing, but with a certain air of… of… ah, I can’t find the word. It’s not fear, it’s… I don’t know…

She looked at it the way one watches a distant fire.

She observed it in the way one sees a sinking ship.

She saw it in the way one watches trees fall in the distance.

So much so that she didn’t even hear me coming. Absorbed, totally captivated by a trance that didn’t

let her escape from that fictional environment where only she and the weapon existed.

I took a step, but even so, she didn’t react, so I cleared my throat softly to try to free her from the clutches of whatever had decided to steal her away.

“Ah—”.

She straightened her back, and quickly lifted her head to look at me. Seconds later, there was nothing left of that fearful Angelique from before; she had returned to being the same as always.

“I brought your water.”

I said as I placed the bottle on the desk. She didn’t thank me. She didn’t even take a sip, she

just… she lowered her gaze back to the pistol, and, to my surprise, she flashed a brief smile.

“Alez… I want to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“It has to do with this pistol.”

“Huh… something you read, or…”

I approached slowly, without touching or disturbing her, until I was behind her and saw the 92 over her head.

“No, it’s not something I read. It’s something… something I dream. Something I dream often, and I

believe…”

“Do you have recurring dreams, Angelique?”

A key to her memories.

“Only this one. This is the only dream I see over and over, and over again. Sometimes, even several times a night. So much so that I can’t sleep. So much so… that I decide to go into your room in the early morning to lie down beside you. Somehow, that prevents the nightmare from returning.”

“…”.

“I’m really happy that you’ve never rejected me or sent me back. If you did, I probably wouldn’t be able to rest that night, so I wouldn’t be fit for

anything the next day, and you'd end up scolding me…"

"Angel…"

"Wait, I am not done."

I couldn't see her face, although I was dying to know what expression she was wearing. I could only see her back and her hair, tied in that lazy ponytail at the nape of her neck. She had her head slightly bowed, and… she continued, continued looking at that pistol without getting tired.

"Something is chasing me."

"How?"

“In the dream. In the dream, something is chasing me. Relentless. No matter how much I run, or how much I try to lose it. That… that shadow, that lightning bolt, runs after me as if I had done it some harm. But I know I haven’t done anything to it. No, I haven’t done anything to it. In fact, I don’t even know it, and it was the one who…”

“Angel?”

“Who took something from me. That shadow stole something from me, took something I wanted, and then decided it wanted to have me too, so I run, run because my life depends on it. If I don’t run, it will take me with it to a place I don’t want to know. But it’s… useless. At the end of the dream, I find myself locked in a room, so I turn around. I lean my back against the wall and hug myself with both arms while… while I see it approaching…”

Her voice didn’t break, nor did her story cut off, but her shoulders… yes, her shoulders trembled. It

was stress. Just trying to remember that repeated dream caused her enormous distress, and even so, she decided to tell me everything.

But I…

I…

“I find myself locked, and, as if enjoying seeing me so helpless, it slows down. It still comes closer, but slower and slower. I can’t see its face; it doesn’t have a face. But, I feel… I feel its nonexistent eyes reading each of my movements. Clearly, I’m a prey, and it’s a hunter. I have no choice but to die, and be devoured right there. Then, in the face of such a scenario, I… let go of my own embrace, and let myself fall. As I fall, I… wake up. I wake up in my bed, with heavy eyes and a racing chest.”

“…”.

“You see? At no point in that dream is anything related to any weapon mentioned, but even so, this pistol… your pistol is— ah-.”

I didn’t let her say another word, and quickly enveloped her with both of my arms. It was a tight hug. So tight that I made her lose her balance, and in response, I also allowed the weight to overcome my knees. We both fell to our knees, with me hugging her from behind. I rubbed my right cheek against the left side of her head just once, as if, perhaps, wanting to make sure that she really was there.

I didn’t want to let her go. If it were up to me, I would be hugging her even now. I could feel the trembling leaving her limbs, and the nervousness she tried so hard to hide fading from her breath.

She’s so warm.

She’s so soft.

I have to take care of her, I have to protect her.

I have to shield her from everything, from everyone, and even from myself. I have to…

“Alez…”

“It’s a dream, Angelique. It’s a dream, like many others. I also have nightmares, and some of them repeat. They repeat a lot, and at night…”

“It’s…”

Angelique said something. She let out a sentence that I couldn’t quite understand, but she didn’t

bother to repeat it.

“Don’t let it torture you, Angel. If you have bad dreams, just come to sleep with me. You know… you know well that I’ll always have a place for you. It’s… it’s even more than that, if you even think that one night you might have that dream, it’s enough to come sleep with me. Really, I don’t mind at all. You can…”

“Alez.”

“Yes?”

“Can I sleep with you tonight?”

“… yes, of course you can.”

. . .

I have no intentions of hiding anything.

At this point in my life, and in my circumstances, I couldn’t care less about what you might think about me, reader. I said it from the beginning: this is just another story. I don’t want to leave you with a lesson, I don’t want to justify my actions, I just… just need, in some way, to tell my truth, to recount my experiences, so that my journey and the people who accompanied me are not forgotten. This includes the good and also the bad.

You might feel that I’m going too slowly. I can’t blame you; I don’t know how a story is supposed to be told to make it comfortable for the reader. What I’m doing is… ah, I feel that, in the end, I am trying to justify myself a bit. Not with words, but with the stories these words compose.

I did many bad things. Many, many bad things.

Since I found myself separated from my platoon and forced to survive on my own, my entire life has been based on causing as much harm as possible to avoid being the one harmed.

I stabbed people while they slept to steal their food because hunger no longer allowed me to think.

In the face of difficulty, more than once, I abandoned those around me to escape, and in the face of injustice, more than once, I looked the other way to avoid getting involved in the mud.

…

I like to think that my parents are still alive, rebuilding their lives somewhere in the Americas. I

hope they are together. I suppose both of them think of me from time to time and lament that son who died in the war and will never return. I would like to send them a letter. Just one, and very short. Just two or three sentences. I would tell them that I am still fighting on my own, that I found a light in my life, and that they should no longer wait for me.

Hm…

I know of many others who also fled the continent. I heard that Julia, a girl who went to school with me, left the country and went to live in Southeast Asia as soon as the unrest began. She came from an affluent family, so I guess they had some information that others didn't. I hope she's okay; I liked that girl…

I no longer remember her face, her hairstyle, or her figure… but I liked that girl.

I wonder if that girl even remembers my name…

. . .

I don’t want to keep anything from you, reader.

Chapter Seventeen: Zara and David VIII

+

This is the story of my demise.

Such a cliché line. I feel dirty just having used it. How awful, I can’t think of anything better. Not a single sentence that sounds better comes to mind, and that just proves how exceedingly mediocre of a writer I am. No, I don’t even qualify as a writer. A writer at least knows the rules to consider when telling a story. I don’t, I don’t understand any of that, I just write out of… out of sheer inertia, nothing more. Here I am once again, pretending to be an artist, with the faint hope that someone will ever read this.

Once, alone, seeking refuge in a countryside cottage in the dead of winter, freezing to death, I

made a fire. I sheltered from the cold in a room akin to a study, filled with documents and apparent works of various kinds. I remember opening a drawer, taking a handful of handwritten notes, and using them to fuel the fire that kept me from perishing that night.

How ironic it would be if…

. . .

October, 2022

I don’t recall ever being under such intense rain. My uniform was so drenched it felt like it doubled my body weight. Walking was agonizing, and running was torture.

Trento, Italy. We were trekking among hills and rivers, treading puddles that could easily have been mistaken for lakes.

It was a defense mission that went to hell sooner rather than later. We were ordered to fortify the defense of a base housing a certain regiment of the Italian armed forces until reinforcements arrived. Reinforcements that never came.

For reasons you'll understand later, I never found out what really went wrong, or why we never received the support we expected. I just remember being promised a quiet night, but we had to stay alert. We knew about that storm in advance, so the sentinels had been instructed to remain on guard within their respective posts.

We weren't calm. We never were during those types of operations. It wasn't too late at night, so no one was asleep. Some were chatting in the mess hall about trivial matters, like Wolf or Sick, and others

were jotting down who knows what in their notebooks, like Javier or Kiara. Zara and I were sitting on the mess hall floor, back to back with our weapons resting beside us. She struggled to stay awake, and I watched through one of the windows as the sky fell apart.

Kyd was also in the mess hall, looking busy. Alone in a corner, he was writing who knows what or doing who knows what calculations in his notebook. Almost nervously, he twirled that pen in his hand while mercilessly scribbling on the page. He already seemed old from the moment I met him, but the war had aged him several years in just two. The gray hairs that could once be counted on his brown hair now covered almost his entire head, and what used to be just occasional bags under his eyes had turned into wrinkles themselves.

Sick gave him a quick glance — oh, right, I didn’t mention it before. Sick, Allen, and Henry were the same person. Henry Allen, nicknamed ‘Sick’, was a doctor. A very good one, actually. I never knew the origin of his nickname, but those

who knew him better said he was a sick man. They didn’t explain if it was about his personal tastes or something he had done in his youth, but everyone was clear that the guy was sick. He was somewhat shy and serious, yes, although I never saw him as strange. Of course, we didn’t talk much either.

As I was saying, Sick gave Kyd a quick glance, and the latter almost instinctively got up while tucking his notebook into his uniform. I saw him approach Moser, who was drinking tea in a corner, to whisper something in his ear and then retreat to who knows where. Sick followed him with his gaze until his eyes could no longer see him. Noticing that I was watching, he turned to me and gave me an incomplete smile; incomplete due to the missing teeth, which he had lost in a confrontation a few months ago. I didn’t pay it much mind.

I looked back out the window and closed my eyes.

The next thing I remember is a flash coming through the window, its light reaching my eyes even through my eyelids. Then, an explosion that didn't even allow us to hear the command voices. Zara's tap on my shoulder, my hands grabbing the rifle…

. . .

I kicked Evans' corpse to get him off me. Some explosion, or some bullet, had split his head open from the left jaw to the parietal. Next to him lay Mayer, a girl who also belonged to the assault team, motionless with her chest and abdomen drenched in red. I think I saw them for just half a second, although I could swear it felt like hours.

We were still inside the mess hall. We had no electricity anymore, and only the fire and the gunfire allowed us occasional glimpses of each other's faces. Moser was shouting orders we couldn't hear as we hugged our weapons, taking cover behind the walls and praying that the enemies wouldn't think to

throw a grenade. Whenever we could, we returned fire, unable to know if any of our bullets hit the mark or not. Zara and Erica were each holding a corner of the mess hall, neither able to get an angle to shoot, so they anxiously awaited orders.

Someone grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the door opening where I was standing. It was Sick.

“Moser ordered us to leave the mess hall! Tell Zara!”

“How are we supposed to get out?!”

More gunfire. I gathered the courage to take a look outside.

The central square of the base was a chaos of insurgents, some armored vehicles, and fire. On the other side, in another building, there were more skirmishes between Amere and military personnel, although they no longer belonged to us, so to be completely honest, I didn't really care about them.

"There's support on the way! The English detachment in Lavis is coming to help us repel the attack!"

"What's the order?!"

"Run outside as soon as the enemy stops suffocating us! I've already told the others!"

I looked around and saw Moser moving away. I turned my gaze back to Sick and nodded.

“And then?!”

“Expand our options by covering more ground!”

It was, to say the least, a strange order. Simply leaving the moderate security provided by the mess hall was, in my view, a bad idea. Just running without a clear destination? We would end up opening fire on each other in such darkness. There was still the problem that it was still raining outside, which would further complicate communications and visibility.

An explosion shook the building. Not wanting to think about it anymore, I patted Sick’s shoulder and ran towards Zara by the shortest path, darting through the death cones of the doors and crawling under the windows. When I reached her, she helped me up, and I leaned over her to shout in her ear.

“When I run, you follow!”

“What?!”

“What I just said!”

“Run where?! Why?!”

“Just do it! It’s Moser’s orders!”

“Alez!”

Another explosion. The noise reverberated loudly enough inside the room to leave my ears ringing. I saw Zara’s lips moving, but I couldn’t understand what she was saying. Suddenly, she froze and stared at a fixed point in space behind me. Her eyes

widened, her cheeks paled, and her striking eyebrows arched outward. She placed a hand on my chest and gripped my jacket tightly, although she didn’t seem to even remember I was there. In one motion, I turned to see what was in that direction.

Wolf and Roa dragging Magiera’s body and dropping it against the wall. I couldn’t see his face. He didn’t have a face anymore. Magiera and Zara had been a team until that day. I didn’t talk much with the guy, but I knew Zara and him were good friends, so it didn’t surprise me that Zara went blank seeing him dead.

I took her by the chin and made her look at me, partially taking advantage of her state of shock.

“If we don’t move, we’ll end up like him!”

She didn’t manage to respond, only nodding very slowly before lowering her head. I stopped trying to return fire; it was clear it wasn’t worth it. I stayed hidden with Zara behind the wall, waiting for the signal that support had finally arrived. I… I know someone else died, someone from our team, but… sorry, I can’t remember who it was. It’s been too many years.

After a few minutes, the intensity of the fire on us decreased, and Sick, who was still waiting in the same place where he communicated Moser’s orders to me, shouted with all his strength something like ‘Now!’. I repeated the shout to Zara and ran out of the mess hall.

Just as the medic had predicted, the support had arrived, and Amere was no longer focused on us but on those two helicopters approaching from the north, firing their machine guns towards the center of the base as the storm drowned out the noise of their rotors. I also saw new troops approaching, wearing a uniform I had seen before. Although those infantry soldiers entered through the diametrically opposite

entrance to ours, which still left us alone against the insurgents' attacks.

I ran. Zara ran right behind me, and out of the corner of my eye, I also saw Freak, Roa, and Sick running out. But… not everyone came out. Not everyone followed the order. I didn't even see Kyd or Moser come out. We managed to circle around the building and descend a slight slope that later turned into a forest.

I remember Roa's guttural shout.

"What about the others?!"

"I don't know, something must have stopped them!"

"Then we have to go back!"

“Going back through the same place is asking to get killed!”

“Are we going to leave them alone?!”

Sick intervened in Roa and Freak’s discussion, being the one who would take command if only the rest of us were left.

“Let’s stick to the order! The others will do the same as soon as the situation allows!”

“They won’t even be able to get out on their own!”

“Then go back on your own, Roa! I won’t stop you, but you’ll be the one to explain to Kyd why

you disobeyed a direct order in such a critical situation!”

Roa fell silent, his wide lips wavering slightly, but Sick didn’t seem satisfied yet. He walked up to him, and despite being shorter, he managed to impose himself almost effortlessly.

“We’ve lost seven soldiers in just minutes, Roa! Shut your mouth and follow the damn order if you don’t want to be the eighth!”

No one said a word. We didn’t have time to waste arguing either.

Behind us, the base; ahead, a vast expanse of trees. I felt my boots sinking into the mud, and my ears overwhelmed by explosions, gunfire, screams, and rain.

“I’ll go one way! Heart and Alez the other! Roa and Freak, go through the center!”

“How far do we run?!”

“As far as you can! Now, go!”

I didn’t want to stay and argue. I didn’t want to stay and fight.

Without thinking about being the best soldier, without thinking about being the most obedient, I took Zara’s hand and ran. Many had died. Many… comrades had fallen. Only at that moment, when we were no longer under immediate mortal danger, did my head spin enough to fully grasp the situation we were in.

Seven people with whom we had shared the last 4 years, first training and then facing terrorists side by side, had died in less than an hour. Seven lives. Seven life stories that could no longer be told in their full reality. I myself kicked Evans' corpse away from between my legs, pushing him aside as if he were a dirty rag. What about their parents? I knew Evans had a daughter, whom he occasionally talked about. He had even shown me a photo of her once, with a proud smile that I could never muster. Did all of that no longer matter? Would it be the same if Zara and I fell? Who, if not me, would kneel before David's mother to tell her about her son's last moments?

I ran. Almost dragging Zara along. I ignored the trees like someone running through cobwebs. The night was only circumstantial; darkness wouldn't stop me.

The more I thought about those comrades who had lost their lives, the faster I moved. Mayer had once told me she liked my eyes. Just that, nothing more than that. Her selfless smile, which she

occasionally showed, rested in the forefront of my memories. I saw her lying there, bleeding out until her pupils lost their shine, and I couldn't do anything. Magiera wasn't my friend, he wasn't someone I commonly talked to, but any friend of Zara's was also my friend. Zara entrusted her life to Magiera even more than she did to me. How could I convince her to run by my side if she didn't trust me as much as she trusted him?

It condemned us both. I was inadequate. I wasn't a specialist of any kind. Just an assault guy, probably the most mediocre of all. I knew nothing. I never took interest in anything. I never wanted to learn anything. If things turned against us, Zara and I would end up dead. Just like with David, I would watch Zara die before my eyes, utterly powerless and with a shattered soul. My soul… was shattered. It's shattered. Even though Angelique is my anchor now, she merely holds what's left of me. Because most of my being died in France, and the second-largest part died in Italy.

"A-Alez, please…".

As I understand it now, Zara had been insisting for a while that she wanted to slow down, but my clouded thoughts decided to ignore her. I stopped abruptly, feeling her chest collide with my back. When I turned to look at her, I let out a pained sigh.

“What’s wrong?”

“We… we’re far enough, Alez…”.

I lifted my head, and it wasn’t a lie, not even the base was in sight, just trees. Trees and more trees. The terrain was sloping, and it seemed to become steeper as we progressed.

“Do you think you can go a bit further?”

“W-why, Alez?”

“They told us we needed to expand our options…”.

“How much longer, Alez? Alez, please, just… realize it for yourself…”.

“What…?”.

Zara’s damp hands held my cheeks, and she forced me to look into her eyes. Even today, I can’t understand if the drops at the sides of her eyes were tears or rain.

“Alez… we were ordered to flee. The order was to escape, to escape however we can”.

“…”.

“Moser must have wanted us to just run away, to try to save ourselves”.

“But it’s—”.

“He didn’t order us to defend anything, didn’t tell us to regroup at a certain point, or provide any kind of support. If we had a chance to save ourselves, he would have ordered us to help the English. He set us free, Alez. He wanted to save us”.

When the underlying meaning of what Zara said became clear to me, I couldn’t help but swallow hard and tense my muscles.

“We… have to go back”.

“What for, Alez? To go back there and get shot? Like Evans? Like Mayer? Like Magiera? Alez, it’s…”.

“Kyd is still there! Moser is still there! Erica is still there!”.

“They must be dead by now!”.

Zaralyne’s fingers squeezed me tightly. It wasn’t so evident at that moment, but her words hurt more coming from her mouth than reaching my ears.

“They must…”.

“…”.

“There’s nothing left for us, Alez. I… I’m going to run, Alez. I’m going to respect Moser’s last decision and I’m going to survive. I won’t stop you if… you want to go back, but…”.

I wanted to respond hastily, but the cold burning my throat forced me to clear it and take a second longer to think. I looked into Zara’s eyes, and then behind her… we were alone, lost at the edge of that forest. Even though we couldn’t see the base or the fire anymore, everything could still be heard perfectly. There were still gunshots, still explosions, still screams. I glanced up and saw the two helicopters from before, this time retreating along the same aerial route they had approached from. I could only think that they had taken too much damage in such a short time to continue providing support. Who knows? Perhaps the ground troops had also started to withdraw. Once again, that would leave our platoons alone.

“… splitting from Sick and the rest was a mistake. We would have much more chances of surviving all together”.

“I couldn’t see where they went”.

“Me neither…”.

Both Zara and I calmed down. The rain wasn’t so bothersome under all those tall, dense trees. Her hands stopped squeezing my head and lost strength, slowly sliding down to rest on my shoulders, just before moving to gently grasp my jacket again.

“Even if you say you want to run, Zara… we don’t have any kind of plan”.

I tacitly made it clear to her that I was going to stay with her, and although I noticed some relief in the way she returned my gaze, there was no trace of anything even remotely resembling a smile on her damp face.

“We should try to find the others. We’ve been running for about ten minutes, I don’t think they’re too far”.

“Not in these conditions. We could still run into Roa and Fred if we head west”.

“Roa didn’t want to leave. Those two… maybe they’re arguing right now, as we speak”.

“Yeah… let’s go, let’s not waste any time”.

Fred was Freak’s name. Fred Ackermann.

I took Zara’s hand again and changed our route. We didn’t start running; we decided not to waste all our energy rushing through such difficult terrain. Instead, we walked briskly, adjusting our direction every few meters.

Every few feet, one of us would look back, terrified at the thought of someone following us.

“How’s your ammo, Alez? I didn’t fire a single shot”.

“Two and a half magazines, or something like that. It should be enough to fire while retreating. The idea isn’t to confront anyone, just keep running as long as the storm allows”.

“And…”.

“I don’t know”.

Though there was no question, Zara understood what my answer referred to. Neither of us had any

idea what we would do after escaping. Assuming we lived to see another day, the next morning we would be enemies of the entire planet. If an Amere squad found us, they would open fire instantly, just like if it were a foreign army with which we couldn't justify our presence in those violent lands. If our own forces found us, we risked being executed for treason if Moser's order was legitimate.

We had no radio, and of course, we hadn't been deployed with our cell phones.

I spoke quietly as I helped Zara jump over a large water hole that had formed in a small clearing.

"We could… hide in a building or an uninhabited house and get new clothes".

"For what?".

“If we also leave our weapons, we might get lucky approaching a military base and pretending to be civilians”.

“That’s not believable, Alez”.

“Do you have a better idea?”.

“No… I can’t think of anything”.

We had already left the previous slope, and the terrain was flat, despite the complexity of walking it.

“They’re going to take us as deserters, Zara. We can’t—”.

“Wait”.

She stepped forward to stand in front of me and placed a hand on my shoulder. Her eyes cautiously moved from the front to the right, until I saw her raise her head slightly.

“Don’t you hear it, Alez?”.

“Hear what?”.

Only then did I notice that the noise of the previous battle no longer reached us, although I don’t know if that was because the combat had ended or if we were already too far away.

“It’s… it’s water. Running water. Right, there was a river around here, wasn’t there?”.

“The Adige”.

“Let’s go”.

“Wait, why do you want to go to the river?”.

I took her arm when she began to walk away, and she looked me up and down with that confidence that characterized her.

“It’s precisely something like the river that can expand our options, Alez. We’ll have more visibility and—”.

Any plan or idea that was arising from that brief exchange came to an end when our eardrums were once again alerted by the roar of a firearm. There were at least three automatic weapons, probably rifles.

“Those are…”.

I didn’t let Zara finish speaking. For the third time that night, I took her hand and ran towards the gunfire.

“Roa and Freak! Amere must have found them!”.

Zaralyne had been the one who wanted to run away without looking back, forgetting about the others, but she didn’t oppose the idea of rescuing our comrades from a likely superior enemy. We sprinted almost in desperation in search of both our allies and the hostiles. The icy rain burned my neck, and although my eyes had already gotten used to it, the darkness made every step difficult.

We sneaked through what almost resembled a wall of trees, and we saw it clearly: a small plain

stretched out and rose about twenty meters ahead, turning into a small plateau; by then, I could also hear the sound of running water. Above it, we saw two human figures lying behind a fallen tree. One seemed to be reloading their weapon, while the other returned fire in very short bursts against an enemy that wasn’t visible from our position. It was Roa and Freak. One of them saw us and considered aiming at us until the other hit him on the shoulder, recognizing us.

We didn’t hesitate for a second to climb up to them, crawling the last half of the way to avoid being hit by any stray bullets.

Everything was so, so dark, even outside the forest. Only the constant, relentless lightning allowed us to see the tangled, exhausted looks of the others. I felt Roa’s hand pulling my clothes towards him, making room for me behind that large, solitary trunk that had been torn from its roots by the voracious wind.

“What are you doing here?”.

“We heard the shots! Did Amere find you?”.

“It’s just a patrol, but these bastards never travel alone!”.

Freak returned fire, almost oblivious to our conversation. Both his eyes and his hair faded into the nocturnal darkness. Zara intervened.

“We have to go, Roa! There’s nothing more we can do!”.

“What?! We have orders to-!”.

“Don’t be foolish! Look around you, you’re alone! How long do you think we can hold out with just the four of us by the time reinforcements from that patrol arrive?”.

“B-but-!”.

“Heart is right, Marco!”.

Freak crouched behind cover, addressing his good friend: Marco Roa. Also, he patted my shoulder and pointed to the other side of the trunk. Of course, I immediately understood the gesture. I raised myself as little as possible to avoid exposing myself, and… honestly, without the faintest idea of where the terrorists were, I mimicked Freak and his short bursts.

I couldn’t hear what my comrades were saying, and I couldn’t see them to deduce whether they

reached an agreement or not.

From up there, it was easier to get an idea of the geographical position where we were. Behind us, the slope descended, and we returned to the forest. On our left, only trees and more trees. On the other side, another slope descended, meeting a road that stretched into the distance, covered by two extensive patches of forest and more forest. On our right, the plateau we were on abruptly turned into a cliff only a few meters high that led directly to the overgrown Adige River.

The river was agitated, violent, and uncontrollable, rushing southward, carrying tons of water that would eventually flow into the Adriatic Sea.

A bullet hit the trunk. Just one. Just one, in all the time I was suppressing them.

I dropped behind the tree and patted Freak, who continued his task.

“Did they reach an agreement?”.

“Yes, we’re leaving!”.

Zara confirmed the response I hoped to hear and clung to me. Her left hand grabbed the collar of my jacket with a force I rarely felt from her. She pulled me towards her, and for a few seconds, I felt her cheek resting against mine, then receiving the warmth of her breath in my ear.

“Alez… they don’t know about our escape. They want to return to base. So, when we’re back, you and I will separate from them and…”.

Her voice was filled with doubt. Doubt, and perhaps a little fear. I crossed my hand behind her back and took her hair to pull her away from me, bringing our foreheads together so I could look her in the eyes.

"… you don't need to say anything. We both know what comes next."

I could barely feel her extremely imperceptible nod before hearing Freak's voice.

"EVERYONE GET DOWN!"

It wasn't his fault, of course… but his shout came too late.

Before Zara and I could stop staring into each other's eyes, an explosion left our ears ringing. I

remember falling to the ground, and when I opened my eyes, I saw the sheer potential energy finish splitting the trunk in two, after some homemade explosive blast had weakened it enough. The four of us were intact, although I saw Roa clutching his right arm as tightly as he could. One half of the tree spun downward, leaving Freak and me completely exposed to enemy fire, just praying that the elevation of the terrain would make it a bit harder for Amere's patrol, who mercilessly opened fire on us. My companion threw himself behind what remained of the trunk, although half of his body was unprotected due to the lack of space, while I, purely on instinct, crawled away from the piece of wood that could only protect the other three. All I could hear was my breathing, and the rubbing of my clothes against each other as I desperately moved toward the edge of the cliff; I couldn't hide. One of my hands slipped and threatened to take me with it into the void. Below… the water flowed and flowed.

I stopped, knelt on the ground, and looked in Zara's direction. I still couldn't hear anything. Coming to her senses after the previous daze, she

looked in my direction and… made an expression I had never seen on her before.

She gestured twice to approach me, but Roa grabbed her arm to stop her.

I…

I was completely exposed to enemy fire. It was only a matter of seconds before one of all those inaccurate shots hit my skull. The foot on the same side as the knee I put on the ground was hanging over the river.

No matter how I looked at it, I had nothing to do.

Zara was screaming, but I couldn’t hear her. In complete hopelessness, she screamed and screamed

with fury and sadness, tearing her throat apart to get her message across, whatever it was.

The human mind is… curious.

How many times have I said that already?

I wasn’t scared, I guess I was too dazed to be. Strangely, at that moment, all I could pay attention to was Zaralyne’s face.

Zara…

Zara, my dear friend, my precious companion.

A loud thunderclap sounded, untapping my ears.

Apparently oblivious to it, Zara broke free from Roa's grip and fell to her knees and hands on the grass, exposing herself while finally managing to communicate what she wanted to convey to me.

"JUMP, ALEZ! JUMP!".

Jump? Jump where? Towards her? It was a bad idea. Several meters separated us; I wouldn't be able to cover them with just one jump. Plus, there was no space; it would have been counterproductive. If Zara told me to jump, I assumed she must have been referring to…

…

The whole world stopped spinning.

It wasn’t a sensation; for exactly a second and a half, the world stopped spinning. Raindrops ceased to fall, a single lightning bolt froze in the sky, creating a permanent light that allowed me to see everything perfectly. Bullets halted halfway, shots ceased, and casings remained suspended, unable to hit the ground. The water below me stopped flowing; Zara stopped screaming.

Zara…

Only two things, in that paused world, continued their course. Those things were Zara, and the bullet that killed her.

In the foreground, I saw her face violently twisted to the right, the result of a projectile impacting the left side of her head. The hand that had been reaching out to me lost all strength and hit the ground with the limpness of a puppet whose strings had been cut. Less than an instant later, the rest of her body followed the same path, and I saw

her head bounce against the ground before ceasing to move, forever. Roa and Fred had disappeared; they no longer existed. Just like the trunk, and the bullets, and the grass, and the trees, and the rain, and the plateau, and the enemies, and…

My entire world turned black.

There was no more black and white; just black.

Why did Zara die? Who was to blame this time? I know David perished due to my own incompetence, but Zara… I can't fully blame myself for Zara's death. And yet, despite saying this, and knowing that her death doesn't weigh on my shoulders entirely… why does remembering her cause me as much, if not more, pain than remembering David? Several times I've shed tears, alone in my room, thinking of Zara, of her smile, of those dark eyes that could pierce through me and understand everything I wanted without me having to say a word. Zara…

Damn it, Zara… Why did this have to happen to us? Why were we born in such a difficult time? I… I can say today that my only wish is that the three of us had been born much earlier, or, with some hope, much later. All I wanted was for us to go out together to see a movie that David would probably choose and that Zara and I wouldn't enjoy, but… that would have been the least of it. As long as I could be with you two, everything would have been fine. Everything would have been fine. Yes… yes, everything would have been fine. And now I'm here, in my room, hiding from Angelique while I write this. Of course I'm hiding; I can't show myself to her like this, not when I now occupy in her life the role that I once felt you two occupied in mine.

How am I supposed to feel? What am I supposed to do? I want to cry, I want to drink, and I want to pass out. And… do you know the worst part, Zara, David? That I wouldn't change what we lived through for anything, because deep down in my soul, I know that all this suffering I feel daily is insignificant compared to how happy I was with you two.

Or…

Maybe…

It’s just the memories that make me think this.

I don’t know…

…

Let me go back.

Despite being soaked through, I felt my throat dry, and, as if it were a defense mechanism of my own conscience, I remembered the last thing Zara said to me: ‘Jump’.

Of course, she must have meant that.

‘If I jump, I’ll probably drown. But even so, my chances of survival are higher than being under a relentless hail of bullets.’ Yes, Zara was right. If I wanted to live…

I let myself fall.

I let myself fall, and the last thing I saw was the lifeless body of Zaralyne Heart, my best friend, bleeding out on a land we should never have set foot on.

Although I didn’t stop breathing, that was my death.

Alez died there, in Trento, Italy. The last of me, of my being, gave its final breath in that fall. The

man who touched the river was no longer the same. It was… someone else. It was me, the me who writes this today.

. . .

As the shock subsided, the rain had already stopped.

I found myself on a mound of earth, trapped amidst a heap of bushes. My face turned towards the sky, although a bridge obscured half of what my eyes could see. Water soaked my feet, but I wasn’t injured. In fact… I was unscathed. I couldn’t tell whether the river had carried me while conscious or not, but when I came to at that stop, it didn’t feel like I was just waking up.

I turned around and crawled a few meters upward until I felt safe enough on solid ground.

Little did I know then, but I had been brought to Nomi.

David’s AUG was nowhere to be found. I had lost it. There was no longer a letter to deliver to David’s mother, and there was no burden tying me to the past. My right hand caressed the 92 still resting on my thigh.

The sky was still cloudy, but it seemed to want to clear.

It all came back to me.

Once again, I relived the last thing my former self witnessed.

Zara…

I felt tears welling up in my eyes… but I shut them, refusing to let a single one escape.

After a while, I stood up.

I looked around… Nomi was a ghost town.

The next steps were obvious.

First, find food, and second, find shelter.

After that…

What I had to do next was…

Chapter Eighteen: Angelique
X

+

May, 2030

“We eat out of necessity. If we could choose, we likely wouldn’t spend time feeding ourselves, Angel. But things are as they are, and we need energy to move.”

“We have to eat.”

“Yes, we have to. If our circumstances were even a little better, we could afford to factor taste into the equation, but we must prioritize nutrients over flavor.”

“I don’t get it. So…”

“But that doesn’t mean we can’t take whatever alternatives we can to make the meat more enjoyable if it doesn’t take too much time or resources.”

I said this while immersing a skinned rabbit into boiling water, inside a small pot over a campfire. I was squatting in front of the flames, while Angelique watched me, seated on a stone a few meters away. It was a hot night, with not a single cloud covering the stars.

“Boiled meat is… too bland for my taste, but if you take the boiled meat and roast it afterward, you get a much better result.”

“I have tried that.”

“Yes, I know. But today I’m asking you to pay a bit more attention, so you can do it yourself someday. Look, if you boil the meat before roasting it, it will end up tender and soft no matter what. It takes more time, but in my opinion, it’s worth it. We have salt, and that will suffice. Some spices would help, but that’s asking too much.”

“Hm… oh, Alez.”

“Yes?”

“Do you remember about… a week ago, I think, when we were leaving Senica? I saw something that caught my attention, but I forgot to mention it.”

“What was it? Was it important? If it was important, you know I’ll have to scold you.”

“No, no. It just… sparked my curiosity because you saw it too.”

“Oh…”

“You saw it but ignored it, as if it were an everyday thing.”

“…”

“Those people… what was all that, Alez?”

The fire crackled.

I used a dry branch to bring the smaller, scattered pieces of wood to the center of the campfire before responding.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her stand up and move closer.

“That was a commune, Angel.”

December, 2030

“Whatever you do, don’t show your gun, Angelique. Everyone here is armed, even if they don’t look it.”

“Being here is…”

“It’s not dangerous. It’s not dangerous as long as you stick to certain rules. They probably already suspect we have weapons too, but no one will shoot us unless they perceive us as hostile.”

A middle-aged woman with short white hair was sweeping the front of her house with a straw broom that was on the verge of breaking. A guy about my age was walking down the street, smiling, pushing a cart loaded with all sorts of items—from food to clothes. Inside what used to be a restaurant, an old man was assessing objects that others brought him, assigning them a value to determine how many bags of homemade flour they could be traded for.

Communes are not all the same, but they share some common elements. It’s strictly forbidden to attack anyone, regardless of their side, within a commune. The inhabitants themselves enforce this rule, and none of them will hesitate to take down anyone who threatens the fragile peace within.

“Did you know there was a commune here, Alez?”

“No, but I suspected it.”

“Why?”

“Because of the geographical location and the fact that the city is, relatively speaking, intact. In the months we’ve been living here, we haven’t seen any military patrols. No one seems interested in reclaiming this place, and that’s exactly what Amere seeks.”

The place was alive. The avenue chosen as the main street by the residents was bustling with at least two dozen people at a time, while many others could be seen in the houses and other buildings. Some were doing business, others working, and others simply trying to lead a somewhat normal life.

Communes are created by Amere, usually in places away from capitals. They are urban centers where no more than one or two hundred people live, who could have been inhabitants from the start or installed later by Amere. I didn’t understand it until

it was explained to me, but these sites are of great importance to Amere. No one here is a trained soldier or an agent prepared to gather information; instead, they are civilians allowed the luxury of having a permanent roof over their heads and a community to rely on. In return, they become Amere's eyes and ears.

Once every one or two months, Amere sends a large shipment of food, clothes, medicine, and ammunition from one of their many bases in each country, distributing it among all these people. However, deliberately, the amount each inhabitant of the commune receives is always very low, forcing them to create an internal market to meet each one's demands. Many of the scavengers you encounter while walking out there could be commune members gathering items to trade with others. Others, with different skills, grow their own food, make homemade weapons, or do whatever they are good at. Amere prohibits the use of money or any monetary sign in the communes, allowing only barter. Communes found trying to use bullets or anything else as currency were burned, and all their members executed.

“What will we do here?”

“Make ourselves seen and known. Communes are important and have no qualms about trading or providing temporary shelter to travelers.”

“… we are not that far from the house.”

“Far enough that no one here has seen or looted it before. They must be an established population. They will be our main supplier. If things go bad, we can always come here and get food in exchange for all those clothes we have at home and don’t use. Or in exchange for books, we have plenty of those too.”

I felt a fleeting inquisitive look from my left, which was gone by the time I turned to meet it. Angelique wasn’t going to let me get rid of the books.

People looked at us as we passed, though none gave us dirty looks. In such small communities, newcomers stand out like a mud stain on a white shirt, so it’s expected to be the main focus of attention. We walked almost fifty meters down the center of that street, surrounded by cheerful people and houses well-kept enough to make you forget how ruined the rest of the city was. When I saw what I was hoping to find, I placed my hand on Angelique’s shoulder.

“There. Up ahead, that big tent in the square. Can you see all those boxes? That must be the distribution center that handles what Amere brings to the commune. If we get closer…”

“There is a man there, sitting in front of a table. He’s… exchanging bags and boxes with other people.”

“It’s the commune’s own market working as it should. There are many, many boxes… Amere must have been here recently. Good, let’s go. If we have time, we’ll try to make a trade today, just to introduce ourselves as new customers.”

“Alez.”

When I took a step forward, Angel’s voice stopped me, but she didn’t speak again when our eyes met. I knew that look: Angelique disagreed with me, but didn’t feel capable of saying it. Something about my reasoning didn’t convince her, and she was willing enough to confront me to get my attention, but not enough to explain it in her own words. Her blue eyes glanced at the square and then back at me. By now, understanding this girl and her quirks is a skill in itself.

“You don’t want to go.”

She simply shook her head gently, making the black strands of her hair brush her shoulders. I lifted my head slightly and saw, a few meters ahead, a girl of about twenty helping an old man carry supplies into what I assumed was his home. I looked back at the girl in front of me.

“You don’t think it’s a good idea to get involved with these people.”

“They are protected by Amere. It would be best if they never saw us again.”

I couldn’t help but show a small smile. I always find it endearing when Angelique voices an opinion different from mine.

“Why?”

“Amere is our enemy, and they will not hesitate to raid our home if they find out we’re occupying it. Besides…”

“Besides?”

“It just doesn’t feel right to make deals with them.”

I wanted to let the silence fill the spaces our conversation left, but voices and occasional laughter prevented it. Angelique is determined. Someone as conservative as she is will have no trouble surviving on her own. She might even get better results than I do, but if she’s ever returned to society, she’ll have too many problems getting along with others. I hope to be there to guide her a bit.

“You’re not entirely wrong, but you missed some things.”

I saw both of Angelique's hands slip into the pockets of her jacket when I said those words. I'd say that's her way of saying 'okay, if you really know so much, explain where I'm wrong.'

"We're not significant enough targets for Amere to send a team after us. Sure, like anyone else who isn't one of them, if they find us on the street they'll shoot us without a second thought, but they wouldn't plan an assault like that, risking resources and personnel, just to kill two survivors who pose no threat. That, and…"

I raised my eyebrows to indicate she should look behind her, and she turned her entire body without any pretense. She saw the same image of the young woman and the old man, and I spoke in a lower voice.

"These people aren't part of Amere, Angel. They're just people who have no other choice but to

serve as resources for the group's purposes. That allows them to live this relatively peaceful life. They're not our enemies. They just want to live quietly, and if they have to comply with Amere's demands to do so, then so be it."

"Hm…"

She fell silent, but didn't look back at me. I couldn't see her face, but I imagined she was thoughtful, or perhaps doubtful. When the old man finally entered his home, the young woman picked up the remaining bags from the ground and our eyes met. After a moment's thought, she offered us a polite smile and nodded, to which I did the same.

"Why don't we stay and live with them?"

"Our situation is…"

Images of a burning city flashed through my mind.

Then I recalled a sea of corpses.

Finally, memories of a pair of brown eyes constantly flattering me surfaced.

And all this happened in the time it took me to blink.

“Our situation is more complicated. We need to stay away from Amere. Come on, I want to—”

“What a lovely girl! Is she your sister?”

A soft voice, speaking slightly broken English, came from maybe two or three meters to my side. Normally, I would have grabbed Angelique's arm and pulled her behind me, but the question took me so by surprise that I could only look in the direction of that woman in her forties or fifties, somewhat dumbfounded.

"Ah, no, she's not…"

Angel reacted similarly, though I could see her eyebrows raised, as if the premise of someone ever asking us such a question had never crossed her mind.

The woman was tall, almost my height, and wore a long, bulky fuchsia coat. She had notably thick glasses and her hair long and loose, as if she were absolutely sure she didn't need to waste time fixing it to look good. In part, that was true.

“Isn’t she? Ah, and here I thought you looked somewhat alike.”

Angel and I exchanged glances, silently agreeing that we didn’t look alike at all. The woman, who had been hiding her hands behind her back, brought one to her chest and smiled at us with a kindness that felt slightly forced.

“Travelers passing through here aren’t very common, but they’re not nonexistent either. More common are those who pass through, resupply, and then continue on their way, never to be seen again. But… no, you’re not part of that latter group, are you? No, I suspect this is just the first of many times we’ll meet.”

“What makes you think that?”

I tried not to sound too hostile with that question, though the woman chuckled softly and tapped her shoe against the ground in the same manner. It was unnerving, in a way. It made me feel like she already knew me, though I didn't know her. As if she had read my entire life in a book and knew everything I had done and gone through.

"Oh, nothing in particular. It's just that you're not carrying a backpack, and the one the girl has is too small to hold things for both of you."

"Maybe we just don't have much to carry."

"You should at least have food and drink for two people. Neither of you looks malnourished, sick, or dehydrated, so I won't believe you if you tell me you have nothing to cover yourselves at night or that you're lacking provisions."

“We could have just finished our rations right before we found this commune. It’s hard to make food last in our conditions.”

“No one who can’t go a day or two without eating survives out there. These cities fell a long time ago, and by now only the most skilled manage to look as healthy and strong as you two.”

“I could tell you we lived in a safe area until not too long ago and were forced to escape. Northern Germany is still standing.”

“A French girl and a young German—no, Austrian, who aren’t family, fleeing east instead of going north? Sounds strange, considering Denmark hasn’t entirely fallen either.”

“… How did you…?”

“I used to travel a lot before the war, I recognize many languages and accents.”

She had been listening to us talk before she caught our attention.

I partly enjoyed the exchange the woman subjected me to. Angelique followed the bounces of our conversation like someone watching a tennis match, while I tried to leave her without words once and for all; at that point, more for entertainment than necessity. It was evident that this woman was a huge problem—more so if I decided to make her my enemy.

“Besides, you need space to carry ammunition for your weapons.”

I paused briefly, focusing on the woman’s eyes and her benevolent smile.

“We don’t—”

“Yes, you are armed. In fact, each of you has at least one weapon.”

Feeling internally defeated, I couldn’t maintain the same friendly demeanor any longer and swallowed before speaking in a slightly quieter tone.

“How do you know?”

“The girl straightened her back when I mentioned ammunition. I’m sure you told her not to show she was armed within the commune. You’re smart, and maybe also very experienced. Well done. As for you… young man, even when talking to a harmless lady like myself, you don’t remove your right hand from the edge of your coat, nor do you stop touching the metal of the zipper with your index and thumb.

You've trained yourself to be able to draw your weapon in the shortest time possible, and that's admirable."

I felt a shiver run down my spine, and my fingers indeed closed around the edge of my coat. I can say that until that very moment, I wasn't aware of that small detail in my posture.

As for the woman… if she wasn't the leader of the commune, I'm sure it was simply because she didn't want to be. She exuded experience and observational skills, just her alone would be such a valuable resource for Amere that I wondered why they'd leave her in this sad commune instead of using her for espionage or even worse tasks. I don't know if she read my mind or not, but the corners of her lips curved into a smile that exuded a bit of cheekiness. I couldn't help but smile back, though I imagine mine radiated certain airs of defeat.

One thing became extremely clear to me about this woman with long, loose hair: she was a good person, but she was dangerous. It was better to stay on her good side.

“I give up. I feel like if I keep talking, you’ll get more information out of me than I want to share.”

“Alez—”

“We’re no longer travelers; we’ve settled nearby.”

I placed my hand on Angelique’s head when she looked my way, trying to intervene. If this woman made me nervous, Angel surely wanted to flee that very moment.

“I understand. Welcome to our commune. You can stay as long as you like, as long as you don’t cause trouble. Although, I know I don’t need to explain that to you, right, Alez?”

“Yes, this isn’t my first time visiting a commune.”

“That’s evident. My name is Irena Egorova, it’s a pleasure. I’m the assistant to the commune leader, so don’t hesitate to ask me anything you want to know about the traders or the services offered here.”

This woman, Irena, extended her right hand to me. Naturally, I shook it, returning the greeting and introducing myself as… as if the world hadn’t stopped, and I was introducing myself to a coworker on my first day at a company.

“Alez Braviel. I’ve been traveling since the war started, though I haven’t left this city for a few months. I plan to visit often to trade goods.”

“And we’ll welcome you with open arms every time you do. The commune has been growing recently, and the market is getting busier.”

“Do you trade food?”

“And almost anything else you might need.”

She had soft, well-kept hands. She was presumably a woman who had never had to lift a weapon against anyone.

She nodded once and stopped looking at me, turning her gaze to my companion, scanning her from head to toe. She gave her a warm smile, but

Angelique didn’t seem to react. She looked at me as if asking for permission, then extended her hand to Angelique.

“You too, little girl. You can come by whenever you want. What’s your name?”

Angelique didn’t shake her hand, nor did she speak. She just stared at the woman, who must have looked like an old lady to her, and barely parted her lips as if she were finishing formulating a sentence. I intervened.

“This is Angelique, my companion. We’ve been traveling together for a few years. It’s nothing personal, she just doesn’t trust anyone but me.”

Overflowing with understanding, Irena turned her eyes back to me.

“That’s probably your fault… or thanks to you. I don’t think it’s a bad thing; trusting others isn’t helpful nowadays. That’s a privilege only we in the commune can enjoy.”

“It must be a relief to have a community to rely on.”

“Yes, it is… and there’s always room for new members. In fact…”

“No.”

That sharp response surprised Irena, but it didn’t take long for her to let out a short, dry laugh.

“I understand, I won’t insist. It’s just that experienced travelers are rare. You know we have

protection, but we never refuse an extra pair of hands.”

“I don’t want to be associated with them, that’s all.”

“Hm… sure, I can see that. Those emeralds you have for eyes reflect that you’ve seen a lot. I would dare to guess, but it would be very rude to delve into your past on our first meeting.”

“Yes, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t. Mainly because I’m almost sure you’d get it right, and then I’d never be able to set foot in this commune again.”

“And neither of us wants that, undoubtedly.”

We exchanged a mutual chuckle that was cut short by Angelique’s words. Words I never thought

I’d hear, and that even now make me drop the pencil just by remembering them.

“Angelique Braviel.”

Both Irena and I fixed our gaze on Angelique. She showed curiosity, and I, pure surprise.

“I thought…”

“My name is Angelique Braviel. I’ve been traveling with Alez for three years… I think.”

“I thought you weren’t siblings.”

That tall woman shot me an inquisitive look, though I noticed she was holding back a smile. A

strange, unknown force made me turn my face the other way.

"…we're not."

. . .

"Aleksej, are you busy?"

Irena led us to a bald man, without eyebrows and full of wrinkles, the same one who had been trading with the other commune members. They exchanged some words in a language I didn't understand, and I was surprised by the harshness of his voice. I didn't ask, but I was almost certain he had some illness that made speaking difficult. I saw Irena vaguely gesture towards me, and the man gave Angel and me a glance. Without a word, all the people in line for trading began to disperse… but that wasn't all. When I turned out of curiosity, I saw that all

potential onlookers had started to move away one by one, leaving the four of us alone. It must have been some kind of code. Some gesture the old man had made must have been interpreted by everyone else as “leave us alone.” Irena, however, did not leave. A few seconds passed, the wind blew, and the man fixed his deep, sunken gray eyes on me.

“You have a secret, don’t you?”

The man’s English was perfect, even superior to mine at times. I took a breath and got on his level, knowing that a misstep could lead to being rejected by the commune.

“We all have secrets. Mine is none of your concern.”

As if we were connected by an ethereal bond, I felt Angelique’s muscles tense. The girl was one

word away from drawing her gun and starting to shoot. The old man, on his part, threw me a self-satisfied smile; the smile of someone who, though they know they have won, enjoys watching the effort of the losers.

“Time will tell if you’re very brave or very foolish. For now, I welcome you to the commune. My name is Aleksej Lis, and I am the leader here.”

“Pleasure to meet you. I am—”

“Alez Braviel and Angelique Braviel. My assistant mentioned it.”

I could have sworn I didn’t hear those names come out of Irena’s mouth, which led me to think they had more ways to play with words than I could recognize.

“Then you know why we’re here.”

“Braviel, Braviel… your name rings a bell, boy. And that can’t be good. Not for you, at least.”

“It’s not like you care. You’re the commune leader; all you care about is knowing exactly how many people live under your rule and how much food comes in each month.”

He chuckled softly, getting up from his plastic chair. He was shorter than I thought; he was as tall as Angelique.

“Amere isn’t prone to forgiveness, boy. Just keep that in mind.”

I didn’t respond, just clicked my tongue in reply.

“Irena, leave us, please. The next words are for his ears and mine only.”

It was somewhat terrifying, speaking to this man for the first time. It’s not common to find someone out there who is so sure they have everything in the palm of their hand. He didn’t hesitate, he didn’t stutter, and he didn’t even pause to think about his words.

Irena smiled at my companion and, obediently, walked away, disappearing into a nearby house. There was no one around, as if the old man were a magician who had made everyone disappear.

“Is all this fanfare necessary?”

“Don’t feel so important, Braviel. This is the procedure for anyone who decides to be our

permanent client. You see, it’s not as simple as with those who pass through once and never return. No, those who reside nearby can mean the greatest relief or the worst disaster for us. I can read your past, and I’m almost sure you belong to that latter group.”

“Your assistant found us trustworthy enough to bring us to you; that should count for something.”

“Yes, of course… I trust Irena as I trust myself, and I wouldn’t doubt her judgment. But, Irena has this…”

I saw him discreetly shift his gaze to Angelique, who fiercely met that look.

“…bad habit of showing weakness when children are involved. She’s a good woman, but her kindness works against her as the commune’s assistant.”

“Beyond that—”

“Before we continue, Braviel…”

I fell silent and gave him time to think before speaking.

“I asked Irena to leave, and I think you should do the same with your companion. There are things women simply shouldn’t hear, Braviel.”

Angelique’s displeasure transferred to me like an image through a data cable.

I was the first to feel the impact of Aleksej’s statement, but after less than a second of thought, part of me understood where he was coming from. I bit my tongue and scratched my chin before glancing at my companion, whose look of

incredulity I assume was due to me not rejecting that request immediately.

“Angelique. Step away a bit, but stay in sight. It’ll only be a minute.”

She’s not one to vocalize her complaints in a moment like that, but I could see immense, colossal displeasure and indignation in the shine of her eyes as she looked at me. Then, without a word, she stepped away and focused all her attention on some red flowers across the square. She must have felt betrayed, hurt; I think that was the only time I ever asked something like that of her. Usually, neither of us did anything without the other, as if we were one. I had an urge to run after her and apologize, but I decided to face the bald man and swallow my bad decisions.

“I didn’t expect you to agree, to be honest.”

“Be brief.”

“I will be as brief as I can. Tell me, Braviel, who is that girl really?”

“Why do you care?”

“I’m just a curious guy, nothing more. You want to form a good relationship, don’t you? It wouldn’t hurt you to satisfy my curiosity, even a little.”

“She’s my companion, what more do you need to know?”

“Is she a relative?”

“And what if she were?”

“Then she isn’t.”

Aleksej was almost as perceptive as Irena, and both knew how to find those small holes in the words that were so easy to exploit. If Irena was an extremely dangerous woman who had decided not to sell herself to those who destroyed this part of the world, then Aleksej was someone who wouldn’t hesitate to make as many dirty deals as he could to keep his men in good spirits. He wasn’t a soldier, he wasn’t with Amere, and he wasn’t the leader of a band of thieves. But he could have given the order to kill me right then and there, and surely all those who lived in the commune would have followed it.

What difference did it make?

“Tell me, Alez. You were in the military, right? Did you ever have men under your command?”

I wanted, with all my might, to lie to him, but it was impossible. I don’t know what gave me away, but it wasn’t difficult for this guy to decipher every aspect of my personality.

“No, I never did. I was almost always the lowest-ranking one.”

“I see… it’s not easy. No, it’s not easy, you know? Having to take charge of people who know they have no choice but to obey you. Many believe command is not much different from machinery, but they’re wrong. Humans are more complicated than any machine, and you have to consider many factors before communicating even the simplest news…”

“…”

“We like being complex. We feel it gives us depth. When we—”

“Get to the point. What do you want from me? What do you want from us? I’m a scavenger willing to bring you any valuable goods I find; why drag this conversation out?”

“Because I want to prepare you for what’s next, Braviel.”

“You’re just the leader of a commune, and I’m someone who wants to trade, nothing more. There’s nothing that needs too much thought.”

“Yes, there is.”

“Then be clear already!”

Though my unconscious mind let out an almost shrill cry due to the stress of the situation, the bald man didn’t even flinch. Instead, he tilted his head to the side and squinted his eyes.

“How much for your companion?”

“…what?”

“I just said: how much for your companion?”

“…I don’t understand.”

I did understand.

“You’re here to benefit from the trades, and I’m just offering you one more of many.”

“…are you asking me to use that girl as a bargaining chip?”

“I don’t care how you file it in your head to feel better about yourself. I’m just doing my job as the commune leader.”

“…”

“Amere rewards its communes with more and better supplies based on what we can provide them. Weapons are valuable, information even more so, and people… people are a very, very well-valued commodity. A young girl like her would guarantee us at least a year of living here like royalty.”

“No.”

“A soul is valuable, Braviel. I wouldn’t offer you an unfair deal. I can promise you years of goods. Food, clothing, tools, anything you asked for would be personally offered by me. I’d make sure you never lacked anything for a good while. You’d have __”

“You’re just like them.”

“Don’t hate me, boy. All I care about is the well-being of the commune. It won’t keep me up at night to ruin a stranger’s life if it means these people live a better day by day.”

“Angelique!”

Almost instinctively, I raised my voice. The girl on the other side of the square lifted her head to look at me.

“We’re leaving.”

“…I understand, I won’t insist again. But the offer will stand.”

I weighed shooting him.

I imagined the remains of his gray matter splattering onto the pavement while the commune’s inhabitants came out to hunt me down, weapons in hand. A small part of me thought it might be worth it.

In the periphery of my vision, I saw Angelique approaching. My face must have been a sight because she placed a hand on my forearm and said what she had been holding back.

“Let’s go, Alez.”

I broke the stare I had with Aleksej and turned, striding away while using all my self-control to avoid turning the place into a war zone.

It wasn’t his lack of morality that bothered me.

It wasn’t that he was a piece of trash.

It wasn’t that he was willing to be the worst scum anyone could be.

It wasn’t that, even knowing what it would mean for a girl like her to be handed over to Amere, he could do it without blinking.

No, it wasn’t any of that.

What tempted me to disfigure his face with punches and bullets was that he had thought about doing it with Angelique. Just the thought drove me crazy. I probably wouldn't have been as enraged to learn that it wouldn't have been the first time. No, none of that. All that enraged me was the mere idea that Angelique could fall into something like that.

Nothing, not even death, would be worse than a fate like that.

On the way back, leaving the commune, I crossed paths again with Irena, who by then felt like a ghost inhabiting every corner of the place. Just by looking into my eyes, she understood that I wasn't willing to exchange even a word with her. She smiled at Angelique and watched us pass, speaking behind our backs.

"You can come to trade anytime you want, Alez and Angelique. Whatever you discussed with

Aleksej, I hope it doesn’t close the door to future exchanges between us.”

Neither she nor I responded, and we continued on our way.

. . .

I couldn’t calm down on the way back, and Angelique didn’t speak to me, though I knew she was dying to. I imagined more than twenty ways to kill that man. Some included taking down the entire commune, others assassinating him silently, and others taking him with me. I had to kill him. I needed to kill him. I wanted to kill him. I couldn’t let someone who saw those kinds of opportunities in Angelique live. He was dangerous. Not because he would try to take her by force, but because the very idea posed a danger to her.

The more I walked, the more the rage consumed me. I opened the door to our house almost violently and entered, taking off my coat and letting it fall onto the couch. I walked to the kitchen and placed my handgun on the table, then rummaged through the top shelf of the pantry, where I knew there was still half a bottle of vodka. I was almost blind, not even aware of my own breathing.

I returned to the dining room, and there was Angelique, watching me as impassively as always. She saw me push the coat aside to sit at the small table and open the bottle.

“Alez.”

I didn’t respond. I took a swig and felt the liquid burn my throat, so I took another to numb my sense of taste.

He wouldn’t come for us. He would never dare, but knowing that wasn’t enough for me. My mind wouldn’t calm down until I saw him dead. But I couldn’t do that, of course. Taking on an entire commune by killing its leader would be a fatal mistake that would very easily cost us our lives.

“Alez…”

I took another swig and put the bottle down on the table.

The muscles in my jaw tensed involuntarily when I remembered that old man’s proposition. The audacity, the damn boldness he had to even suggest that he could improve my life at Angelique’s expense. I didn’t want to teach Aleksej a lesson; I just wanted to satisfy my urge to see him clutching his stomach, trying in vain to keep his guts inside.

I gave in and picked up the bottle again, deciding to keep drinking. Angelique remained standing by the door, looking at me with that same expression she always has every second, minute, and hour.

“Hey, Alez—”

“Don’t you realize that I don’t feel like talking? Do me a favor and lower your fucking voice, okay? It’s irritating.”

My mouth, which said words I didn’t want to say, and my eyes, which spat disdain at my companion, moved before I could realize what I had just done. There was silence, and her only reaction was to lower her shoulders almost imperceptibly. That movement made the wings on her back drop a few centimeters, as if they, instead of her eyes, were allowed to express the pain of a wound.

“…”

I lowered my gaze and rubbed my face, massaging over my eyebrows while internally cursing myself with hundreds of insults. Of course, when I looked up, her wings were no longer there.

I swallowed, defeated.

“Angel… please, sit here.”

She nodded once and without hesitation or shyness, took a seat beside me. She stared at the bottle for a few seconds but didn’t reach for it. Angelique prefers sweet liquors.

I scratched my chin for a few seconds and honestly wished Angelique could punch me. I deserved, at the very least, for her to retreat to her

room in offense. I deserved something, any kind of punishment would have suited me.

So, I took another swig of vodka.

“Tell me, what have you been reading lately?”

She turned her face to look at me, as if trying to decipher my expression. I’m sure she saw me looking tired, maybe a bit distressed. She thought for a long time and then mimicked my gesture of scratching my chin.

“I found a book of… children’s stories. It has fables and such. It’s cute.”

“I didn’t imagine you’d be interested in that sort of thing.”

“Neither did I. I picked it up out of curiosity, but I think it’s one of my favorites.”

“I see…”

“Mhm…”

“Which one was your favorite?”

“There was one set in a kitchen. It was about a new knife that had arrived, but he didn’t know that the rest of the knives were hiding on purpose so that the kitchen owner couldn’t find them and they wouldn’t have to cut their friends, the vegetables.”

“That sounds… silly.”

“It’s cute.”

We exchanged glances once more, and the urge to smile took over me.

“Why is it cute?”

“The ending has a nice message.”

“Ah, that’s why…”

I was about to take another swig but decided against it. I rested my head on the back of the couch and closed my eyes, trying to dissolve all the tension in my body that refused to disperse.

“Tell me it.”

“Huh?”

“Tell me the story. If you say it’s so cute, then I hope I’ll like it too.”

I think she thought about it for a few seconds, and then I felt her sit a little closer, letting our legs touch. She cleared her throat and lowered her voice a bit.

“One morning, like any other, all the cutlery in the kitchen’s top drawer were awakened by the oldest and biggest knife of all, who brought shocking news…”

Chapter Nineteen: Solo I

+

Rien n’a changé.

Il n’y avait aucune raison d’avoir peur, ni de remettre en question nos convictions.

Ce que j’ai ressenti a toujours été plus grand que n’importe quel secret que nous aurions pu essayer de cacher.

…

Il doit y avoir quelque chose qui nous attend tous les deux quelque part.

Quelque part que nous n'atteindrons jamais…

…

Ça ne veut pas dire que j'arrêterai de chercher cet endroit.

The first thing I did was get rid of my uniform.

It wasn't easy for me to change, although everything becomes much simpler when you force yourself to see the world through lenses that turn everyone into your enemy. Regardless of their appearance, demeanor, or attitude, that person will be after exactly the same thing as you, and they will never be willing to let you have it. When the cards are dealt that way, the only possible reaction is to kill.

You have to kill before they kill you. And do it fast—don’t try to negotiate. That stranger is thinking the exact same thing and is just waiting for you to let your guard down so they can drive a knife into your throat. You can’t let that happen. You can’t die out of pity, out of compassion. None of the goodness you might try to show will matter when you’re lying on the ground, choking on your own blood, so don’t make the mistake of showing yourself as someone kind. No, don’t show yourself at all. They don’t need to see you. It’ll be much easier to take them out from behind.

The guilt will fade someday, and you’ll have time to reflect on it once you can sit down and breathe without feeling like someone’s watching you. Do whatever it takes to guarantee your survival, even if it means destroying everything you’ve been up until now.

I adopted that mindset the moment I stepped outside to look for food. Even so, it didn’t stop me from crying the first time I killed another survivor.

I had already been on the road for a couple of weeks, heading south. I hadn’t come across anyone, and for a while, I even thought no one else was still alive out there.

In that ghost town, in that store where almost nothing of value remained, I saw a shadow move in the corner, and before I realized what I was doing, I had already fired three shots in its direction. Only one bullet hit, piercing cleanly through the forehead of a gray-haired man dressed in rags. He didn’t have anything on him—not food, not weapons, nothing. When I understood that there was no undoing what I had done, I pressed a hand to my face, trying to hold back the nausea, and left the place with tears in my eyes. I sat in the street, trying to calm myself down, repeating that dark mantra once again.

You have to kill. You have to kill before they kill you. It’s not a crime if it’s for your survival. There will be time for regret one day.

I was no longer myself.

What came next was… seeing a monster reflected in the eyes of my countless victims. Some attacked me first, but that wasn’t always the case. I didn’t kill for the pleasure of killing. I tried not to, especially when the other survivor was completely at my mercy, but I never hesitated to shoot if I felt even a hint of threat. Looking back now makes me feel sick. Not because of the act of taking lives itself, but because of how many times I went too far, driven by fear and hunger.

I ended more lives than I ever did while serving in the army.

. . .

These stories aren’t important; I’m only writing them to remind myself of who I was, and who I’ve

become.

January, 2023

I already felt desensitized. I could never convince myself that the people I fought against weren't truly human, but little by little, I managed to suppress the self-loathing that came after every kill. A few months after I separated from my platoon, I had fully become a killer. I wasn't the only one. The truth is, by then I was just another one of those out there. Shooting someone in the back no longer meant anything to me, and instead of guilt over the act itself, I felt more anxious about whether someone nearby had heard the gunshot and was already on their way.

Fortunately, or thanks to good logistical planning, it was relatively easy to find ammo for my pistol. That gave me a profound sense of security. As long as I had the ability to defend myself by opening fire,

the only thing I could blame my downfall on would be my lack of skill.

But that never happened. I was always the one who came out on top.

"… twenty-four rounds. As long as I don't end up in a shootout, this should last me for a while."

I muttered to myself, my gaze fixed on the pistol resting on the table. The weapon lay there with a full magazine inside and a bullet in the chamber. I had an empty magazine in one of my pockets, and one that was a little over halfway full in my hand.

The outskirts of Vicenza, in a house like many others nearby. The city was silent, with no sign of military presence. The whole area was in a deplorable state, and I hadn't found anything of interest in the few houses I'd checked. Still, I felt

calm. A few days ago, I'd finally come across a decent backpack. It was a school bag, medium-sized, and it finally allowed me to carry some supplies on my journey. I had food and water, enough that I didn't have much to worry about for… maybe a week, I think. I'd only stopped to rest and take stock of my inventory, nothing more.

At that moment, all I really wanted was to find a pack of cigarettes, but I hadn't had any luck with that either.

The dining room was just as messy as the rest of the house; the windows were broken, letting the breeze in. At least the table and the three chairs around it were intact, though I would've preferred cushioned chairs instead of those uncomfortable wooden ones that give you a backache after sitting for a while.

I leaned my head back against the chair and looked up. There was a ceiling fan that looked like it

might fall at the slightest push.

“It’s still a while before dark. I haven’t seen or heard anything since I arrived, but I don’t like moving around cities during the day. Too many windows, too many corners… I’m an easy target. Yeah… I suppose… it wouldn’t hurt to stop for a bit…”

It’s annoying, but traveling alone makes you talk to yourself almost constantly. You don’t have to be crazy; even knowing there’s no one around to hear your words, your thoughts become clearer and more coherent when you let them out as speech. Language is the true manifestation of human reasoning. It’s what we are, and if you ask me, it’s what truly sets us apart from animals. Of course, I’m just speaking from my humble opinion; as I’ve said before, I don’t really know anything about these things. Yeah, I don’t know anything except how to survive and how to hurt, nothing else.

I made sure my backpack was beside my chair and tucked my pistol into my clothes before letting out a sigh and crossing my legs, placing my hands on top. I closed my eyes… and within a minute, I was asleep.

It sounds almost insane to think about taking a nap in a situation like that, now that I reflect on it after so many years.

. . .

The sun was starting to set.

I was jolted awake by a scream of pain.

The kind of broken, guttural scream you'd hear in a low-budget horror movie.

I leaped up from my chair, just as scared as I was confused, and almost instinctively grabbed my 92. The scream was followed by moans and groans, along with different types of yelling and roars of fury. I grabbed my backpack and prepared to get out of there as quickly as possible, filled with fear and no desire to find out what was happening, but I hesitated. It wasn't until about five seconds later that I realized those screams… were getting closer.

I nearly panicked, perhaps more out of a lack of preparation than a lack of control over the situation. Unable to pinpoint exactly where those approaching voices were coming from, I rushed toward the closest hiding spot I could see.

I regretted my decision almost immediately when I slipped into that dark, small, and claustrophobic bathroom. The stench was horrible, and although I couldn't see anything, I was almost… almost sure there was… something in the bathtub, hidden behind the curtain. All of that added to my discomfort, but

what really made me go pale was that when I tried to close the white wooden door, it creaked loudly and mockingly as it swung back open, stopping at an angle of about twenty-five degrees. In my rush, I had broken the lock, and I didn’t have time to come up with a better plan.

I tossed the backpack aside, holding the pistol firmly in my right hand, and hid myself in that disgusting bathroom, waiting for whatever was about to happen.

The cowardice that kept me from finding a better hiding place ended up being what saved my life because less than ten seconds later, the front door was kicked open with a bang that felt like someone had poured a bottle of ice water down my spine.

I did my best to disappear into the shadows behind the door, wishing with all my might to become one with the darkness.

I heard a dull thud, like a stone hitting a wall, followed by another moan of pain.

“Don’t kill him.”

“He won’t die from that. These motherfuckers can take a beating.”

There were four of them. Three spoke German, so I understood what they were saying, although I couldn’t make out the Italian man’s words as he screamed in pain after each blow.

I heard what sounded like a punch, followed by the table sliding and someone stumbling to the ground.

“He doesn’t understand us, and we don’t understand him. We’re wasting our time.”

“Words aren’t the only way to make ourselves understood, you know? We’re going to kill him anyway; the least we can do is try to get some information out of him.”

“But… just look at him. He’s a nobody. I’d bet my sister he doesn’t even have a rank to show off. These bastards don’t get respect unless they prove they deserve it, and none of the ones that matter are out here alone.”

“Non so niente! Giuro che loro non mi hanno detto niente!”

“Ugh… I’m sick of the screaming. Yoba, shut him up.”

“Yes, sir.”

I heard a blow, heavier than the ones before. It was followed by a groan and then a quiet sob of pain.

From what I understand now, two of those three were close—both in rank and friendship—while the third was much newer and simply followed orders.

“What’s your plan?”

“What?”

“What do you want to do? If you don’t care about getting something useful out of him, what was the point of bringing him here? You were the one who didn’t finish him off.”

“No, no. First off, I didn’t want to bring him here—that was *your* idea. I just wanted to interrogate

him for a bit, but I lost interest when I realized he only spoke Italian. You're the one who's insisting we keep this up."

"There's no point in quitting now. We're here already, so let's try to make something out of it."

"Alright, I'm done."

"Done?"

"Yeah, I'm done. I'm not going to keep wasting my time with this nonsense. I'm just going to sit here while you play interrogator. I'll laugh later back at base when you have to explain why we took so long to get back."

"Calio…"

“No, you’re not going to convince me. Go ahead, keep going. Get that information you’re so desperate for.”

While the two argued, the third kept hitting the poor Italian. He beat him so relentlessly that the man stopped crying out, as if he had resigned himself to his fate.

“…and it’s smells like shit here. Where’s that stench coming from?”

“Yeah, it’s unbearable. It’s coming from that bathroom over there. Let’s wrap this up quickly and get out of here. Yoba, stop. You’re going to kill him. Give him a second to breathe.”

Finally, the blows ceased, and I felt a bit of relief knowing they didn’t want to approach my hiding

spot. Not that I blamed them—the smell really was unbearable. It was a mix of vomit, rotten eggs, and decaying meat.

“Sit him in that chair… no, no, facing this way… good, just like that. Now, leave him to me. Let’s see… I can’t ask him much, but he’ll spill something valuable once he cracks.”

More punches followed.

At last, I dared to peek out from behind the door.

The scene was even more brutal than I’d imagined. Three well-built men against someone so frail he looked like he could lose a fistfight with Angelique.

The one they called Yoba was short but muscular. His arms and back were well-defined even under the thick camo gear he wore. Calio, on the other hand, was almost the opposite—tall but thin, with a bandana covering his face. He sat on the floor with the kind of casual confidence that suggested he was fully in control. I never learned the name of the third man, the one who seemed to be leading them, but I remember he was stocky and had piercing blue eyes.

The leader kept hitting the Italian. The victim wasn't tied up, but he offered no resistance, simply accepting the blows as they came. At that moment, I figured he was completely broken, that he had resigned himself to death and shut down, waiting for the end.

But something else caught my attention. Despite the younger man calling the leader "sir," it was clear that none of the three were part of any formal military force. Their uniforms were too different from one another, and their weapons were far too varied to be standard issue. The youngest carried an assault rifle on his back—its name escapes me now,

but I’d seen French soldiers use it before. Calio had leaned an AK model against the wall next to him, while the leader wielded a CZ-805 in excellent condition.

The beating went on for another ten minutes. Yoba stood by, hands clasped behind his back, unbothered, as if waiting for orders. Calio had lit a cigarette, much to my envy. I watched as the leader grabbed the victim by the hair, yanking him off the chair, only to slam him to the ground and kick him in the face. He was panting and sweating from the exertion, his hands and clothes stained with blood from the many cuts on the Italian’s face.

“This fucker… give us *something!* Point us somewhere, drop a name, anything! I refuse to leave empty-handed!”

“Did you get bored?”

“Yeah, Calio. I’m bored. I’m bored, and my knuckles hurt.”

While the man on the floor wiped the blood from his mouth, the leader drew a revolver from the back of his waistband. I don’t know what kind it was, but it was short and compact. He didn’t need to say a word; just pointing it at the beaten man’s head was enough to make him whimper and beg for mercy.

“I hate to say it, but this was a waste of time…”

“Fermati, per favore!”

It was the first thing to come out of that man’s lips after so many blows, and even Calio lifted his head a little to pay closer attention.

The Italian, hands trembling and moving painfully, did his best to take off one of his boots as quickly as he could. From inside the shaft, a carefully folded piece of paper fell, which he grabbed and, without getting off the ground, extended toward the leader.

“Oh… look at that, Calio! Maybe this wasn’t such a bad idea after all.”

“Say that after you read whatever’s on it.”

“Always the pessimist. From trash like this, anything we can get is very, very valuable.”

“Think it’s coordinates?”

“With some luck, yes. Some idiot must’ve given him a map to the nearest safehouse in case he got

lost. Let’s see…”

None of the three were expecting the Italian’s counterattack. As the leader bent down to take the paper, the scrawny man grabbed his wrist and yanked him hard toward him. The bulky man, overbalanced by his own weight, fell clumsily onto his previous victim, dropping the revolver when the handle hit the ground. By the time Yoba reacted, the short-barreled weapon was already in the Italian’s hands, and he wasted no time firing three shots at Yoba. The smaller man hit the floor, blood pouring from a bullet wound in his neck and two more in his chest.

“CALIO!”

The gunshots startled the man with the bandana, who, in his rush to grab his rifle, fumbled it with his fingertips, sending it clattering to the ground. He lost precious seconds, during which the leader—struggling to recover the revolver from the man

beneath him—was fatally shot in the head. The Italian, who was far more skilled than any of the three, tried to finish off his last remaining foe, but the weight and bulk of the body pinning him down made it difficult to aim. His last two rounds hit the wall near where Calio had been sitting.

“He was—he was my friend, you son of a bitch! Killing you won’t be enough! I’ll feed you alive to the dogs!”

The sound of a rifle being cocked echoed through the house, but the gunshot that followed didn’t come from Calio’s weapon, which was already trained on the Italian.

It came from me. With a single clean shot, I killed Calio. His body slumped lifelessly against the wall, and I stepped out from the bathroom. The Italian’s eyes were locked onto mine, a mix of fear and gratitude in his gaze. I took a few steps forward,

returned his stare, then holstered my pistol, and he exhaled a deep breath, relieved.

…

I still don’t know what made me jump to his aid that time. Maybe I just couldn’t bear to witness such cruelty against a single defenseless person, or maybe it was the admiration I felt watching him cling so fiercely to life, almost managing to overcome all of his attackers. Whatever it was, it pushed me to stain my hands for someone I didn’t know at all.

He mumbled a few words of gratitude that I don’t clearly remember as he struggled to push the body off and get to his feet. He was completely battered. Despite his pain, he tried to communicate with me, smiling from ear to ear, brimming with energy. I didn’t feel great—not after everything that had just happened. All I could do was raise a hand to make him stop and speak in a more subdued tone.

“Sorry, I can’t understand what you’re saying…”

I could see the disappointment in his face, but it didn’t dampen his spirits. Groaning in pain between laughs, he went to rummage through the corpses of the other three.

I glanced at the bodies and scratched my chin. I wasn’t sure if I should feel… good or satisfied. I didn’t like killing, I still don’t. But was it justified this time? I acted out of… humanity, or so I wanted to believe. I saved a defenseless person from a miserable death. It was, if anything, a small sign that there was still something in me capable of acting for someone else’s benefit. Yet… it didn’t feel right.

The man spoke to me, saying things I couldn’t understand at the time. Today, looking back, I can piece together that he was telling me how he and his group had been ambushed by the three men, and he was the only one to survive. That he was out looking for supplies to take back to his base, where the rest

of his companions were waiting. I watched him pick up the rifle that Calio had been carrying, checking the chamber before turning back to look at me. He hesitated for a moment but then approached again, almost timidly.

“Vieni con noi! Sei in gamba e ti devo un favore. Ti offriamo qualcosa da mangiare e bere. Ti piace l’alcol?”

“… Sorry, I really don’t understand.”

“Ah…”

He inhaled sharply, pressing a hand to his chest, trying his best to make himself understood in broken English.

“Come with me! Group! Uh… companions!”

“Oh, that’s what you mean… no, I don’t think… I’m not looking for a group.”

“We are strong!”

He slapped his chest twice, open palm. Then, with complete confidence and a strange sense of trust, he spoke the last word I would ever hear from his mouth.

“Amere!”

I felt the air leave my lungs.

Seeing that I wasn’t reacting, he made a gesture of resignation, then nodded once more in thanks.

He turned his back on me.

Checked Yoba’s pockets and kept walking.

I watched him go…

He stepped over the leader’s corpse and headed for the door.

…

I took my 92 in my right hand.

Lined up his back between the sights.

Waited.

I thought maybe he'd turn around once more, but he didn't.

He placed a hand on the doorknob…

I fired twice, and then three more times once I saw him hit the floor.

He didn't even scream or groan, just faded away like a flame snuffed out by lack of air.

I leaned against the wall and let myself become part of it for a while, suffocating in the stench of shit and gunpowder.

I was right—I shouldn’t have even tried. There was no point in trying to be good, in acting with humanity. Everyone out there was a piece of filth, myself included. Each and every one of us deserved whatever fate was coming. There were no good guys, no innocents. In the end, it was just those who survived and those who didn’t. No one deserved saving. And if there were people who did deserve protection, they weren’t worth the risk.

“… it’s almost dark…”

I took the CZ-805 and a couple of magazines. I also stole Calio’s cigarettes. I lit one after leaving the house and walked away, trying not to think too much about it. Trying not to think too much about anything. That small experience had taught me that thinking would only bring me trouble.

“… you have to kill them before they kill you…”

I filled my lungs with smoke and kept moving.

Chapter Twenty: Solo II

+

I don’t think I could have survived alone. Not for much longer, at least.

I never used to dwell on this. Not when all I could think about was how I would take down the next person I encountered.

How many…?

…

I need… I need a drink…

…

How many Angeliques have I killed out there?

Because I have murdered women. More than once. Not out of pleasure, not by my own choice… I think. But I did it, in the end. Even if most of them held a weapon in their hands, that doesn't erase the sin committed. Sometimes I think about it. Sometimes, I do it on purpose, as if I were trying to torture myself.

I think about… Angelique pulling the trigger when I do. That girl could die at any moment—before me or after. And what if the women I killed carried stories just like hers? What if I took the life of an Angelique out there, one that another Alez was trying to protect?

What would become of me if that were the case?

How do I move forward…? How do I keep going alone after remembering the warmth that another human being can provide? What reason would I have to take another step? How many stories just like mine have I brought to an end?

I know it sounds insolent. I know I have no right to complain, being the one who survived while so many others didn’t. But I can’t help it. I never chose this life.

I don’t know where I would be today if the war had never started. Maybe at home, helping my mother. Or working alongside my father. And Angelique… Angelique would be in school, preparing for great things. That girl is brilliant, and so capable.

…

It infuriates me to think about how different things could have been. When I stop to reflect, I realize I have almost no good memories from before I met her. Everything I lived through after being separated from Zara and until I saw Angelique for the first time is nothing but a dark, opaque stain. Time itself blurs as I try to undo it, and it spreads so much—so, so much—that it ends up staining that girl and everything around her.

We should have never met. Not just because of the circumstances that led to it, but because the world should never have twisted so violently as to make such a meeting even possible. Today, all I can do is curse.

I curse this present for having led me to Angelique.

But… even so…

If I had never met her…

If I had never met Angelique…

April, 2031

When I entered the room—my room—Angelique was sitting on the bed, a book resting in her hands.

On the nightstand, a candle flickered softly.

“Can’t sleep?”

“That’s not it. I just never heard your door close, so I figured you were still awake.”

“You’re telling me you can hear these hinges creak when your room is all the way across the house?”

“Yes. You can’t?”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I sat on the opposite side of the bed, eyes lost somewhere on the floor.

“I read…”

“Read what?”

“I read that staying up this late is not healthy, Alez. Can you do something about your sleeping habits?”

“Not likely. I’m a creature of habit. I can’t change that just like that.”

“What do you even do until so late? If my calculations are right… I usually fall asleep an hour or two before you. Every day.”

“I look out the window, check entry routes A and B, inspect our weapons… there are things to do. It keeps me occupied.”

“You could do all that in the morning.”

“Yeah… I could. But then I’d have nothing to do at night.”

She lowered her book, giving me a look that at first seemed empty, but that I could easily read as confusion.

“I don’t stay up because I need to do those things. I do those things because I stay up.”

Satisfied with the answer, though not with its meaning, she turned her gaze back to the pages. I glanced at whatever she was reading, and my eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“That’s German.”

“Yes.”

“You don’t know how to read German.”

She frowned slightly and shot me a sideways glance, the kind that silently begs someone to stop talking.

“I’m trying to learn.”

“But, Angel…”

She buried her eyes in the book once more, a desperate attempt to silence me through sheer determination. Her stubbornness amused me.

Competitive and proud. She hates being left behind, and since I’m the only person she interacts with daily, I guess she feels the need to prove me how capable she is. I could tell her that I already know she has the potential to surpass me in absolutely everything, but I don’t want to lose either. Besides, this is more fun.

“… I can help you.”

“I found a book in the library. It’s in English. A beginner’s guide to learning German, so I shouldn’t have trouble teaching myself.”

“Really? And what are you going to do about pronunciation?”

“…”

I had said exactly what I shouldn’t have, and in return, I got a clear look of irritation. Angelique’s pupils screamed that my question had offended her. She was probably about to say something like *I’ll manage*, but she knew that wouldn’t be a viable excuse. Before she could dig herself into a deeper hole, I tried offering a reassuring smile.

“Let me help. I promise I won’t get in the way too much.”

Weighing her options, she must have realized that the best outcome she could get from this exchange was a partial victory: she would allow me to help so she could catch up faster.

“You picked a strange book to start with. I’m sure there are easier ones in the library.”

“What’s wrong with this one?”

“Nothing, it’s just…”

I shifted a little closer, just enough to be at her side and read along.

“Don’t take it the wrong way, but you should start with a children’s book. When… when I wanted to learn French, they gave me stories for kids.

They’re much easier to read, and they use shorter words.”

“Was that in Amere?”

“Yeah, the people I met there.”

“How many languages do you speak, Alez?”

“Saying I speak them would be giving myself too much credit. I’d say I can understand… five. German, English, French, Italian, and a bit of Hungarian. I studied some others in school, but I barely remember them.”

“Did you learn all that in Amere?”

“No, just French. I learned Hungarian from some relatives, English in school and in the military, French in Amere, and Italian… just from wandering around. I didn’t have much of a choice.”

This time, it was her turn to raise an eyebrow. I wasn’t sure what was going through her mind, but she eventually returned her gaze to the book and murmured:

“You’re smarter than you think, Alez.”

The chuckle that escaped me didn’t even make her blink. I leaned in a little more, deciding to push my luck.

“Give me that book.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Just hand it over. I want to try something.”

Not without a slight pout, she placed the open book in my hands, waiting to see what had crossed my mind.

Closing it to make my intentions clear—I was starting from the beginning—I spread my legs slightly. She understood the message, shifting between them and resting the back of her head against my chest. Then, I opened the book again, ready to spend the rest of the night reading that story to her.

“Let’s see… The Song of the Nibelungs. I know this one…”

. . .

September, 2023

If that had really been an established commune, they would have shot me on the spot. That didn’t happen, luckily, though the looks I got almost made me wish a shootout would break out.

I didn’t really know how far south in Italy I was, but I was near the sea. I was walking down a narrow street, strangely busy. It almost felt like a communal area, where all kinds of survivors gathered in an attempt to help each other. People hurried back and forth, and no one stopped to worry about a stranger or an unfamiliar face. I saw men trading food for weapons, children trading weapons for clothes, and women trading their bodies for shelter.

I saw in the face of a beast the desire to tear my intestines apart when the artificial light reflected in its pupils.

That mother shielded her little daughter behind her as she saw me pass by with the rifle in my hands. If I had truly wanted to attack her, what could she have done? Instinctive behavior is… incredible, really.

I slung the weapon over my back and tried to act as if the sight hadn’t affected me. I wasn’t there to cause fear or create conflict. My intention was the same as always: to find food, water, and, with some luck, a temporary shelter. I had faith that a place like this would be, as far as one could expect, safe to rest in. That small city was intact, and it probably hadn’t been a victim of large-scale battles, much less bombings. It was true that there was no sign of military or security forces, but I also didn’t see any patrols that would make me think Amere had taken control.

“… lack of time. How long do we have to wait?”

“A couple of weeks. A month at worst.”

“That’s still too long. There’s no resistance left, what’s taking them so long?”

“Lack of personnel.”

“I won’t believe you if you tell me they’re short on people.”

“Not short on people, but short on free hands. Not so much in the south, but in northern Italy, they’re still up to their necks. Same in Austria. It’s a tough terrain, and almost the entire military corps escaping from Spain ends up in their ranks, so it doesn’t feel like their defenses are falling. Tough sons of bitches.”

I stopped as I reached the entrance to another alleyway.

I heard two voices speaking in English. It wasn't as fluent as that of a native speaker, but it was clear enough for me to understand, even just in passing. I leaned my back against the wall and, as discreetly as my expressionless face allowed, I set myself to eavesdrop on those two men talking.

"What are our orders?"

"Keep waiting."

"Bullshit…"

"Yeah, bullshit. I tried…"

"Tried what?"

“I tried telling them we’re trying to stop the rain with our bare hands, but it was no use. Sirius keeps saying we have to maintain order with the little we have.”

“He’s a fucking idiot. Man, every day, dozens of people arrive, and plenty of them are armed.”

“You think I don’t know that? The situation is unsustainable, and if it hasn’t blown up yet, it’s only because the newcomers are timid.”

“They’re not timid, they just get intimidated by the crowd.”

“That’s the same thing.”

“It’s not the same. It’s just a matter of time before a group of brave, armed men show up, realize

there’s no real structure keeping order, and decide to take the town for themselves.”

“That’s out of my hands.”

“I know, but…”

At first glance, none of that information was useful to me on a personal level, though I couldn’t stop thinking that one day, it might be. Amere was struggling to take over a remote Italian town, and the only reason was how naturally people sought to stick together. While it was true that nothing officially kept those people united, it wasn’t far-fetched to think they would quickly band together against any force trying to subjugate them.

“What if we try to recruit new members right here? Some of them have… pretty lifeless looks. I don’t think it’d be too hard to convince them.”

“And then you’ll be the one to explain to Ahri that we started a recruitment mission on our own. I’ve seen what they do to those who make up orders, and I have no intention of losing an eye or an ear.”

“Ah…”

“What’s wrong?”

“Alright, we won’t do anything. I’ll follow orders… as long as they bring good results.”

“… Those are dangerous words, brother.”

“You gonna report me?”

“No, but walls have ears.”

I stepped away from the wall as soon as I heard that sentence. Not because I thought they were talking about me, but because I was sure I wouldn’t be interested in anything they said after that. That information was enough.

The city was a safe place to stop and rest. I’d probably run into bandits or looters, but I wouldn’t have Amere’s patrols harassing me. If I could stay there, just for a couple of days…

“Hey, kid! Kid! Traveller!”

A house like any other on the side of the street. Right by the door, a man, maybe forty-five years old, waved at me, beckoning me closer. He had short, graying hair, and although he looked

noticeably tired, he wore the smile of a used car salesman.

“Looking for a place to sleep? We’ve got a room available here!”

I weighed my options. Plenty of people were walking through that street, yet this guy had focused solely on me. Meeting his gaze and not taking my eyes off him, I crossed the street to approach him, only to notice his smile growing even brighter.

The house was… fine. Nothing special, but intact. It had a small front yard protected by low stainless steel bars and a clean red brick exterior.

“Why me?”

“Huh? Did I say something that bothered you?”

“No. But…”

“You look tired.”

The man lowered his voice a little, placing his hands on his hips.

“Almost everyone you see walking around here are city residents. And those who aren’t… well, they don’t exactly inspire confidence. You’re different. You look like a good guy. In fact…”

“What?”

“You look like a soldier. Not your clothes, of course, but those eyes speak for themselves.”

He let out a deep, carefree laugh. His broad cheeks flushed easily.

“We don’t ask for much, if that’s what worries you.”

“I never said I was looking for a place to stay.”

“Well, it won’t be long before night falls. Tell me, do you have somewhere to sleep?”

“…”

“That’s what I thought.”

It was funny—something about his innocent blue eyes took away my desire to punch him.

Though he told me, I don’t remember his name.

“Food, ammunition, a weapon… whatever you can offer will be welcome.”

“I have… I have 9x19 ammo. That’s all I can give you.”

“Hm… how about ten bullets for a night’s stay? Breakfast included.”

“Only ten rounds? That’s… extremely generous. Suspiciously so.”

“We have no electricity, no gas, and the water pressure is minimal. We’re also not the only ones

offering shelter around here, so we can’t charge too much.”

It was convincing. I still felt like there was something important he wasn’t telling me, but searching for an empty house on my own was probably a worse idea. It wouldn’t be surprising if all the houses in the area were just traps to catch travelers. In places like that… you really can’t trust anyone.

Or maybe… is that just me?

“Alright. I’ll stay for just one night.”

“Excellent! Come inside, I’ll take you to your room.”

The inside of the house was… empty. There wasn't a single bullet hole in the walls, but there was hardly any furniture either, and the room that guy led me to shared the same emptiness. There was only a bed and a table, nothing else, in that three-by-five-meter room whose only exits were the door leading to the house's main hallway and a window overlooking a very, very neglected backyard that connected with the rest of the houses on the block.

I walked over to the table and set my backpack on it. At no point did I turn my back on my host. I searched one of the pockets and counted exactly ten rounds for my pistol.

"FMJ?"

"Yeah. Is that a problem?"

"On the contrary, they're perfect."

The guy took the bullets with both hands before slipping them into a pocket.

“One last thing: try to leave your room as little as possible. Everyone here is a stranger, so we can’t guarantee that the other guests won’t be… hmm… let’s say, not very well-intentioned. Though, I suppose I didn’t really need to clarify that.”

The last time I saw that man was when he walked out the door. I silently stepped forward and, trying not to make a sound, locked the entrance. Then I moved the table to block it as an extra security measure.

I sat on the floor, my backpack at my side, and leaned my back against the bed. From inside my pack, I pulled out a can of tuna, which I opened with my knife, along with some crackers that had long since gone stale and soggy.

“I have to leave as soon as dawn breaks. It’s not safe. I have to avoid places this crowded…”

The food tasted awful, but it did its job. I never liked canned goods or preserved foods.

I looked out the window as I ate. From such angle, I couldn’t even see the yard, but watching the sky as night fell was the only way to pass the time. The moon was already visible, nearly full.

I tossed the can aside and fell into silence.

Silence…

That awful silence.

I thought about the conversation between those two Amere members. Austria was still fighting, and from the looks of it, it wasn't going to fall anytime soon. That was a relief, I suppose. But it was strange. It comforted me to think that my friends and family still had hope, yet at the same time, all of it already felt foreign to me. I was no longer part of the same world they lived in. I was someone without a homeland or leaders. No friends, no family. A wandering entity on streets as dead as itself, spreading more death in order to avoid it.

Hundreds of paths opened before me. Not just literal ones, but figurative ones too. Nothing was stopping me from settling in a city like this, trying to form a group to defend ourselves from external attacks and holding out until the war ended—building a community. Nothing was stopping me from becoming a bandit, indulging in whatever luxuries I could at the expense of others—no one could stop me.

My fate was something else. My fate was born purely from my own indecision, from my lack of

convictions.

“I should sleep, at least for a while…”

I didn’t bother lying on the bed. In that same position, I closed my eyes and rested a hand over the pistol on my hip.

Back then, I had a habit to help me sleep in peace. I thought about my parents, about David, about Zara, about the days of peace… If I forced myself to think of nothing else, sometimes, with a little luck, I could drift off without my sleep being stolen by nightmares.

Little by little.

Second by second.

I got lost in the intangible voices of those I never wanted to forget.

. . .

The first shot woke me up, followed by a few explosions and some distant screams. I sprang from the floor and grabbed my pistol with my right hand. I aimed at the door, fighting off the dizziness that comes naturally right after waking up, and slowly raised my backpack with my left hand before slinging it over my shoulder.

It was still dark, the light scarce. I blinked hard, trying to clear my vision. No more than four hours had passed, and dawn was still far off. Shots of various kinds and calibers echoed within the house. The barrel of my 92 aligned perfectly with the top third of the door, and I braced myself for an assault at any moment. Whoever attacked this house must

have been after me. Of course, there was no other explanation. Surely, they were hunting me.

In retrospect, I can admit that this thought was weak and unfounded, but it was the only thing that came to mind in that instant.

Three consecutive knocks came at the door, almost making me open fire to take down whoever was trying to enter my room. I heard a voice. It was the owner of the place, to whom I had given the ten pistol rounds.

“WE’RE UNDER ATTACK! DON’T COME OUT FOR ANYTHING!”

I didn’t respond, simply because I didn’t know what to say. I’m not sure whether the man left or was struck down by the relentless, directionless gunfire, but I never heard his voice again.

It felt bitter. Now, I'm almost certain that man died right there. I had mistrusted him until the very end, and if anyone was going to try to harm me, it was him.

Knowing I had a bit more time, I holstered my pistol and grabbed the rifle on my back. I heard footsteps on the other side, moving back and forth, though not trying to enter my room. But… there were many footsteps. From an open position, I might have been able to fight them off, but being confined in this room, I was just waiting to be killed as well. I assessed my options. Turning around, I saw the window. There was no one in the yard; not even the neighbors had come out to see what was going on. The answer was clear.

I swallowed and gripped my rifle by the barrel and top. With one sharp blow, I smashed the window with the stock, then shattered as many of the remaining shards as I could from the frame. Once the hole was large enough, I leaned out of the

window to assess the state of the outside. Indeed, there was no one. The fight was entirely taking place inside the house. The grass outside, along with those trees towering above the roof, had grown wild and untreated. A wall separated me from the next house, a wall I could jump without much effort.

It wasn’t productive for this to give me a brief sense of calm, because as I focused and moved out of that heightened state of alert, I noticed the rapid pace of my heartbeat. I was agitated. Sweating and biting my lips. I was scared.

I kept breaking the glass to avoid any cuts that might hinder me later, when someone knocked at my door again. I twisted my upper body to glance in that direction. I waited, truly waiting, to hear that man’s voice again, the one I had judged wrongly from the start, but it was a stranger’s voice that took over the air around me.

“This door is locked! There’s someone inside!”

They were coming for me.

I felt my lips dry almost instantly, as though someone had dumped a bucket of beach sand on me.

Without a second thought, I leapt through the window, using my arms and weapon as a shield to protect myself from the remaining shards of glass that could have sliced my head or face.

I landed on the other side, surrounded by those last fragments of the window. No more than a second later, I felt something warm on my forehead, but I didn’t have time to check what it was. The unmistakable sound of a shotgun made my chest tighten.

“Shit…”

I turned over to lie on my back and waited, but they didn’t even give me time for that.

“The window! Look through the window!”

I fired.

I couldn’t see anyone within range, but I fired anyway.

Fighting gravity to get back on my feet, I shot at the ceiling inside the room, then at every section of wall I could see. As long as I kept shooting, they wouldn’t peek. That was my only chance of getting away; I had to reach the wall.

Their shouts and insults reached my ears, but they were drowned out by the fire coming from my 805.

After every two difficult steps, I fired a bullet in the direction of the window. I thought I was keeping track of the ammunition properly. This way, I could reach my goal with relative safety, and once I had a moment to think calmly, I could decide which direction to take.

Click.

No bullet left the barrel of my rifle. Without stopping to check if I had run out of ammo or if the gun had malfunctioned, I pulled out my pistol and fired in the same manner. A few steps later, my back hit the wall.

That moment of vulnerability would be inevitable. To jump over the wall, I would need both hands, and those few seconds would be the perfect opportunity for my enemies to rip me apart.

I took a breath, bit my tongue, and turned around as fast as I could to grip the edge of the wall. As I climbed, I heard a shout. I drew strength from nowhere and pulled myself up. Only once my body was fully across the brick did I hear a gunshot, and from the shock, I dropped backwards to the ground on the other side. A burst of shots hit the wall. I could feel…

Each bullet, individually, hit with its full violence. Beyond the noise of the explosion or the lead fragments breaking the sound barrier, the proximity to the wall allowed me to perceive with perfect clarity how the projectiles slammed into it.

I stood up with my heart in my throat and my 92 raised. A sharp pain in my back forced me to bend slightly to bear it while taking steps backward.

“… they won’t follow me.”

It wouldn’t do them any good. Worse still, they were at a disadvantage in terrain that favored me. I convinced myself with that thought and looked around. It was the rocky yard of another house. Fortunately, it appeared neglected and ignored. I spotted the door that would lead me inside and wasted no time approaching. It was closed, but two kicks were enough to make the weak wood give way and snap. Inside, with a lit candle in her hand, was a woman.

My first instinct was to point my pistol at her.

“Aspetta! Nun sparari!”

I examined her features.

She was a thin woman, very thin, in her mid-thirties, with long blonde hair and a weathered face, probably from inadequate nutrition. While one hand

held the candle, the other rested over her chest. She wasn't armed. Still, I didn't let my guard down; I didn't lower my weapon.

Only…

It was only when I felt something enter my right eye, forcing me to close it, that I shifted the weapon slightly to align the sights with my left eye and quietly winced. I felt two distinct burns: one from the cut on my forehead, the other from the blood that had gotten into my eye.

"Back against the wall"

"Espera, ppi favuri"

"Back against the wall!"

I made a gesture to reinforce my command, and the woman nodded slowly before retreating until her back was pressed against one of the white walls inside.

It was a nearly untouched living room, one that hadn’t seen any combat yet. Keeping the weapon trained on her, I scanned the room for the closest piece of furniture. It was a plain wooden cupboard. I opened the doors one by one and began rifling through the contents, throwing glasses and glass ornaments onto the floor, where they shattered upon hitting the tiles. I was looking, but I couldn’t find anything—a clean rag, anything—to wipe my face.

The woman started to sob, and within seconds, the sobbing turned into full-blown crying. Yet, she never let go of the candle—the only source of light in the dark room.

“Shit!”

She screamed at my frustrated shout. I bit my lip, forcing myself to focus back on her.

“Medkit.”

“N-nun capisciu—”.

“A medkit! Something to treat my wounds!”

Desperation slowly overtook the woman’s face, her features illuminated by the yellowish glow of the flame in her hand.

I pointed at my my face with my free hand as I took strides toward her, pushing her further and further back against the wall.

“BLOOD! A CUT! I NEED TO TREAT IT!”

She swallowed so hard I could see it in the dim light, nodding vigorously like a scolded child.

“¡C-corta!”.

Her eyes widened when she understood my request, and she pointed toward a door down the hallway that emerged from one of the walls of the living room. I signaled with my pistol for her to go ahead, and she offered no resistance.

Shots and explosions echoed in the distance, but they no longer concerned me.

I could see a bathroom on the other side of the door. Once inside, she opened the mirror above the sink from the center and took two steps to the side

while pointing inside, muttering words I couldn’t remember. Her face was almost entirely drenched in tears, and the way the flame of the candle flickered made me think she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

I entered the bathroom behind her and closed the door. She shut her eyes and let more silent tears escape.

“A first aid kit, alright…”

I glanced around the claustrophobic bathroom. There wasn’t even a window for light on any of the walls. The sink with its mirror, a toilet, and on the other side, a bathtub. Everything looked old.

“Get in the bathtub.”

I said, and knowing she wouldn’t understand me just through words, I indicated the tub with the barrel of my pistol. With clear resignation, she complied and, without being told, sat down in a corner, hugging her legs after setting the candle aside. I saw her finally exhale all the air she had been holding in her lungs when I lowered the weapon.

…

So, so cruel…

I grabbed the first aid kit and opened it right there. I could still feel blood seeping from my wound, and though I didn’t pause to look at myself in the mirror, I knew that half my face must already be stained red.

I no longer pointed the weapon at the woman, but I hadn’t tucked it away either. Using my free hand, I rifled through the small box, which, I have to admit, was quite well-equipped. I turned on the faucet, and a stream of slightly brown water stained the white sink. It wasn’t ideal, but it would do.

“. . .”

Neither of us spoke a single word as I treated my wound.

A perfectly vertical cut that ran from my scalp down to just past the middle of my right eyebrow. The only scar I have on my face.

Once the bleeding was stopped, I covered the wound with a gauze pad and secured it with medical tape.

“A-ah…”

The gunfire had ceased. I never found out what happened in that battle, nor who had attacked us. I sighed, feeling safe and whole again. I placed a hand on my face, and beyond the sting of accidentally touching my wound, a deep sense of discouragement consumed me from the inside.

How close I had been to death. Alone, with no help, no one shouting my name or offering me support. Was this going to be my life from now on? Would I have to go through this kind of stress all the time? Impossible. My limbs felt like they were made of wet clay, my breathing was out of sync with my thoughts, and when I lifted my face, I saw furtive tears trying to escape from between my eyelids. I squeezed my eyes shut and wiped them away with my wrist.

Without turning to look at the girl still sitting in the bathtub, I spoke to her.

"… I'm sorry. I was rough… because I was scared. I'll repay you with food."

I was forced to turn my head when I felt two weak hands pulling at my 92.

It didn't even count as a struggle. The strength of one of my arms was more than enough to prevent the woman, who had been terrified and cornered moments before, from taking the weapon. Her bony fingers clutched both the slide of the pistol and a small portion of the grip, pulling it toward her body with no care or thought.

"Wait! Don't do that, let go! I'm not going to hurt you!"

But she didn't respond. She only let out screams and guttural noises from the strain she was exerting.

“Listen to me, I’ve got what I wanted. I’ll leave you food and go, that’s all.”

It was no use. She tried to scratch my arm, but my coat was thick enough to barely let me feel the sting of her nails. She pulled harder, again and again.

I hesitated.

The barrel of the gun was mere inches from her chest. I only needed to move my finger slightly, and the problem would be over right then and there. But I didn’t want that anymore. I’d had enough, at least for the night. Besides, considering what I had already put this woman through, I didn’t want to… I had already done enough wrong for one night in the name of survival.

“Let go! Can’t you hear me?!”

That same hand on my arm dropped like a hook around my neck, scratching me superficially but clearly aiming to do much greater damage. She wasn’t leaving me any options. I tried to find a less violent solution. I grabbed the hand attacking me with my free hand and exerted all the force I could with my other hand, trying to lower the barrel, maybe fire a shot into the ground to scare her off.

But she; it was her who wouldn’t let me.

Probably with the last of her strength, she lunged at me just as I pulled the trigger.

A scream reverberated through that tiny bathroom. The last of the woman’s strength faded, and the next thing I saw was that Italian woman slumped against the bathtub, clutching her side with

nothing but panic on her face, desperately trying to stop the bleeding. She didn't even look at me anymore. It was as if I didn't exist.

I looked at the gun in my hand.

I took a step back, opened the door, and ran.

I didn't stop until the sun burned my skin, and the landscape had completely changed.

. . .

April, 2031

I didn't even get to read an eighth of the book before Angelique fell asleep against my chest. I

placed the book on the bedside table and laid my hands gently on her shoulders.

“Go back to your room, Angel. We can continue the story tomorrow.”

“Hm…”

She lazily opened her eyes and looked up at me, meeting my gaze for a few seconds before closing them again and settling more firmly against my chest, shifting her body slightly to fit more comfortably in the space between my legs.

“This is fine…”

She spoke in a tone so calm that even the wind outside, if there had been any, seemed to pause.

I placed a hand on her head and ran my fingers through her raven-black hair. I intertwined them with the strands, playing a little with the tips.

I leaned just slightly over the table and blew out the candle, extinguishing the flame and plunging us into darkness that was anything but unwelcome.

. . .

Yes…

In moments like these, I conclude that everything was worth it.

Chapter Twenty-one: Solo III

+

Just a few days ago.

A clumsy, though sweet, melody caressed my ears.

I was sitting several meters away, watching her back rise and fall with the motion of her arms. I sank into the backrest of one of those soft armchairs in the modest music room of our house and looked around. Three tall double windows opened onto the inner courtyard, draped in long red curtains. Aside from my chair, there were many others, arranged in such a strange way it seemed almost accidental. Two elegant wooden doors led to the eastern hallway on the second floor… which made me wonder: how had they gotten the piano into the room?

A damn piano, seriously. There's nothing this house doesn't have. If I had been the owner, I would've chosen to stay and survive here rather than abandon my home and leave all of this behind.

…

No, that's a lie.

A lonely chandelier hung from the ceiling, casting light across the room and pushing back the kind of darkness that comes with a winter night. I let my eyes fall on her again. Angelique tapped the keys softly with her fingertips, bringing music to life.

She and I discovered her ability entirely by accident. One day, while we were cleaning, she sat down and began playing a song like it was the most normal thing in the world. I didn't ask, but clearly,

she had no memory of ever playing before. Why, reader? Muscle memory, maybe? I don’t know, and I don’t care.

She quickened the pace, maybe by mistake, or maybe because that was how the tune echoed faintly in her head.

I know nothing about music. Absolutely nothing. I never had a favorite band or artist like my classmates did—I just listened to whatever they liked.

Even so, I could tell some of the notes sounded… off, like they didn’t belong in the same piece.

Is that what they call playing out of tune?

A few seconds later, she stopped, letting her hands fall on the keys with mild frustration. I stood and walked over to her. I placed my hands on her shoulders and rested my chin on her head.

“What was that?”

“It doesn’t sound right. I don’t remember it well.”

“I think it sounded good.”

“Yeah, but…”

“But…?”

“Not how it should. I messed up a lot.”

“Hm…”

I stretched a hand toward the piano and pressed a few keys at random. I was a little surprised when they made no sound.

“That’s not how it works.”

“What did I do wrong?”

“You have to press harder.”

She gently pushed my hand aside and, to show me, pressed those same keys with enough force to make them work properly.

“The hammers need to strike the strings hard to make them vibrate. If you just press the keys lightly, you won’t hear anything.”

“Strings? What strings?”

Angelique thought for a moment, then let out a breath that turned into a laugh.

“The piano’s a string instrument. When you hit a key, you’re actually hitting the strings that make the notes.”

“Did you read that somewhere?”

“No.”

Without warning, she let herself fall slightly back, resting her head against my stomach so she could look up at me. She was smiling beautifully.

“I just know.”

May, 2024

A year and a half of solitude.

I walked south until there was no land left beneath my feet. I wasn’t sure what I was after. I wasn’t even sure I was seeking anything at all. There were plenty of chances to stop and settle. Nearly empty towns still holding life, abandoned houses silently offering themselves to be lived in, communes that would’ve welcomed me with open arms…

I never stopped.

When the sea blocked my way, I simply followed the coastline, like a marble keeping its momentum as it rolled along a gentle curve. I clashed with bandits and Amere fighters, traded with civilians and threatened some, picked up fragments of the language by distracting myself at night with magazines or books found in whatever place I used as shelter, ran from the bigger battles…

A commune had taken root in Reggio Calabria. Amere's presence was overwhelming, their grip over the city complete. The irony was that such domination brought peace. As long as you didn't rebel or disobey, you were safe. They didn't even strip residents of their weapons—whether because they didn't fear uprising or because they avoided antagonizing the population, I couldn't say. The most shocking thing was boarding the ferry to Sicily without having to surrender my arms. No questions, no interference. They allowed the city to function almost normally. In hindsight, that told me everything.

From the southern coast of Sicily, I saw the island of Malta in the distance. All of Sicily belonged to Amere. Heaven knows how large their forces were, but anyone thinking of reclaiming the island would need to be ready to face resistance fit for a whole nation. They weren't concerned about a lone madman carrying a rifle. Everything was under control. Everything.

So I turned back.

Could I have lived a quiet life if I'd just tried to blend into that community in Sicily? The city ran smoothly. Food, work, shelter—it would've been easy to adapt to the local rhythm.

But I didn't want that. A part of me felt nothing but bitterness toward the faction that had taken everything from me. It might sound strange, but scavenging through trash sounded more appealing

than surrendering to the comfortable complacency they offered.

I retraced the coast, boarded the ferry once again. Recalled every step I had taken and walked them backward—same cities, same towns. It took me months, long months filled with violence and despair.

I knew it would happen eventually. It was only a matter of time. My luck dried up. No food, no supplies, and nearly no ammunition.

By the time I reached the border between Italy and Slovenia, I hadn’t eaten in days. My body felt brittle, and I could feel how the long months of deprivation had worn down my endurance. I was light, weak, sluggish, soft.

I stared ahead, aimless. Stones and trees watched me pass, wondering if I'd soon become one of them. The rifle on my back felt far too heavy for a weapon with six, maybe seven rounds left.

Headaches became a constant—dehydration and malnourishment. My arms couldn't even lift my pistol without straining. But when death drew near, I found the strength somewhere deep within, summoned by sheer will to survive.

My 92's barrel still smoked, aimed at the skull of a bandit I had just encountered in an alley near the Gorizia–Nova Gorica crossing. Just bracing for the recoil had drained me. My arm throbbed, fingers trembled. I looked down at my own hand. My skin was dry, losing elasticity—not a good sign.

Like a doctor tending to a wounded child, I crouched over the body, checking his pockets. He had no backpack. Pants, coat, inner layers… nothing. Nothing I could use. If he had a stash

somewhere, it was out of my reach—and not worth the time or energy it'd cost to search for it.

I sat on the ground, despondent, eyes fixed on the bullet hole I'd left in his head. Blood didn't spurt; it streamed in a steady flow across his brown skin. His face was no longer recognizable, just red. I looked lower, toward the puddle forming beneath.

Blood…

Then, I thought about it.

I swear I did.

I swear on Angelique, I considered it.

No one was around. No one to see, to judge.

If I just… silenced my humanity, and gave in to survival instinct…

If I satisfied the need and then forgot…

I set my pistol down and picked up the knife the man had tucked into the back of his pants.

I began sweating, panting.

Grabbing the corpse's wrist, I extended his arm, turning it slightly so the inside of the elbow faced up. I lowered the knife, pressed it gently to the skin, and began applying pressure.

I froze as the blood started to trickle.

It was strange—violence hadn't scared me in a long time. But maybe it was the realization of what I was about to do. I buried the blade further. More blood surged. I stopped again, bile rising in my throat. Slowly, I turned my head—and met his dead, open eyes. Facing me. Maybe challenging me.

Panic surged.

I yanked the knife away and bit my lip so hard it bled.

I had nearly eaten human flesh. My mind had toyed with the idea of cooking it, devouring it quickly, without tasting, just to ease the hunger and preserve some shred of sanity. But no—no mind could endure that. None should. No man could do

such a thing and stay whole. I couldn’t be that man. I couldn’t end like that.

I kept the knife, took my pistol, and crawled out of the alley. Forced myself to stand once I reached the street.

There was nothing. No one. The whole world had ceased to exist; only I remained. The sky was overcast, and experience told me rain would soon follow. I couldn’t move. For a second, I believed this might be my final resting place.

I could surrender to the fatigue, let myself fall, let time consume me like the wind takes leaves—but when the first drop hit my nose, instinct once again gripped me by the throat and made me walk.

Each step was leaden, worn, exhausted. I stumbled into a house, indistinguishable from the

rest.

I stood with the help of the doorframe, the door swinging open under my weight. One glance told me there'd be nothing useful in that forsaken place. Damp walls and floors, cigarette butts, plastic bags and wrappers everywhere. Not inhabited, but clearly used as shelter before.

No furniture remained—only fragments. Whether those who'd stayed were driven out at gunpoint or left of their own will, only the walls knew.

I left the door open and stepped into the living room. Lightning briefly lit the space. A thunderclap followed.

I searched every drawer and shelf in the front room and kitchen. Papers, utensils, souvenirs, photographs, ashes, stones, shell casings, shattered

glass, soiled bandages, a broken revolver in a corner… nothing useful.

I returned to the entrance and looked around once more, the space still lit occasionally by distant flashes.

…

Were those scraps of life—or fragments of time?

I’d judged them worthless so quickly, but…

Why, then, did my chest ache at the thought?

Most papers were notes survivors had likely written to communicate while away. Kitchen

utensils were worn but intact, clearly once used daily. The souvenirs were simple, the cheap kind tourists buy for coins—yet dozens of them were scattered, many broken. The photographs belonged to the house's original family. A large one—parents, two children, elders, maybe close relatives. The ashes were newer. The wind had scattered them, but most had piled in a single spot. Likely the remains of indoor campfires for warmth. Same with the stones. The casings were a mystery. Had they been fired to scare away refugees—or had refugees used them to kill the original owners? I didn't want to know. The glass came from windows in both rooms I'd seen. Nearly all were broken, patched with plastic and tape. The used, blood-stained bandages sat piled on the kitchen counter. They may have saved someone's life—or been the last thing they wore.

The revolver… an old model I couldn't place. Its hammer jammed, trigger limp.

All of it was life. A vast, sprawling history told through debris left by who knows how many since

this nightmare began. The good, the bad—remains didn't differentiate. They just lay there, bare and honest. The universe had passed through that house.

Someone once told me we're all within each other.

Did that mean what I saw was a reflection of my own essence? Of who I was, or had been, or would become? What should I feel? Pity? Anger? Sympathy? Compassion?

I closed the door from the inside. Whatever the case, I needed rest.

And… if I truly was doomed to die of hunger, then that house didn't seem like a bad place to breathe my last.

I gathered stones, made a circle on the tiles. Threw in splinters of furniture and old paper, then lit a fire to warm my hands and clothes.

Minutes later, my stomach howled again. It hurt, badly.

I figured I had nothing to lose by checking the rest of the house. Maybe, just maybe, I'd get lucky. Anything—canned peas, even expired.

Pistol in hand, I searched each room. Of course, all were wrecked, looted the same. Bedroom windows hadn't even been boarded. Rain leaked freely, soaking the floors.

Drawers, wardrobes, closets—empty.

Then, the last room surprised me with its condition. A child’s room, no older than ten. Toys and posters told me that much.

Defeated, I sank into the still-soft bed and weighed my options. It wasn’t over, not yet. Houses nearby. Shops. Something had to be there. Even a spoiled can of beans. I couldn’t give up—not until I knew what I was really searching for. Not until the journey meant something.

Listlessly, I picked up one toy with my left hand. A dinosaur. I’d collected those too.

Memories of childhood returned. Peaceful. Carefree. The average kid. I thought of my father smoking by the window, my mother cooking dinner, me arranging my toys after another lazy summer afternoon.

Nostalgia is strange. Why do happy memories hurt? Paradoxical. We should rejoice—but…

I placed the dinosaur back where it was. Didn't want the child to return and find it touched without permission.

I stood and left. Hungry, tired—and now, sad. I walked the hall with my gaze fixed to the floor, but soon stopped

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Rubbed my eyes with a hand.

What was the point of it all? Why was this happening? How much longer? Where was that child? Where were his parents? Where was the child I once was? Where were my parents?

…

Where were my parents?

A darkness as deep as the void swelled in my chest.

So much pain. Given, taken.

I wasn’t going to kill myself. I wasn’t giving up. I wanted to live, that much was clear. Above all, I wanted to see another sunrise. To believe in a better future.

That had to be true.

Everything screamed for resignation—but I didn’t like that idea. I wouldn’t follow that thought.

Of course not.

Had I never met Angelique, then…

…

I lifted my head. The only closed door nearby stood before me. White wood, but not pure.

Out of habit more than hope, I turned the handle and slowly pushed.

As it opened, the dim light through the windows revealed terror itself. Eyes, lifeless yet aware, stared back. Death’s gaze. A stare exhausted, spent, brutal, merciless. His pupils pierced straight through me, dissecting my being, understanding and unraveling me in a breath. That red gaze felt nothing. No sorrow, no pity. It simply was—and pursued one

thing: death. His own, others', the world's. The end of all. All was there. All ended there. If we are all in each other, then his death gaze was the death of all things.

Fear.

Terror gripped me.

I was utterly at his mercy. That fear—to die—was the clearest proof that I still desperately wanted to live.

He moved. Wordless, he raised his pistol and aimed.

Of course, I did the same. But it was pointless. He had the upper hand. He was faster.

I shut my eyes and pulled the trigger—

But only one shot rang out.

I felt like I had kept my eyes shut for hours.

I waited for the finishing blow. For him, standing in complete dominance, to end my life without so much as a drop of sweat.

But… nothing happened. After an uncertain stretch of time, I slowly lifted my eyelids, just as a splintered, high-pitched sound reached my ears.

The man on the other side still had his weapon aimed at me, but his entire image was shattered. The bullet I had fired had struck him dead in the center

of the forehead—yet his gaze remained unchanged, as if it hadn’t even registered. As if he were immortal.

I lowered my hand and let the weapon fall to the floor.

Like a walking corpse, I stepped forward, surrendering myself to the abyss within those pupils. I grabbed the sink with both hands, just beneath the now-fractured mirror.

It was me.

Was it me?

It couldn’t be.

If I was the one gripped by terror, completely out of my mind, how could the man in the mirror look so… so cruel? Why didn't he feel that fear? No—why didn't that fear show on his face? Why was I the only one who had to endure the pain of being afraid, and not the reflection?!

I didn't recognize him. I didn't recognize that image. I couldn't have said with certainty that the man with a bullet lodged in his skull was me. I raised a hand and touched my own face—not the man in the mirror. That one couldn't be me.

The face was gaunt and pale, with a grown-out beard and horrible dark circles.

What would my mother say if she saw me like this?

To think…

To think there would come a day when I could no longer recognize myself in the mirror…

I stayed there for a while, thinking. I checked the faucet—water still trickled out. Behind the mirror cabinet, I found an old can of shaving cream, probably untouched for years. The texture wasn’t great, but it would do. I applied it to my face, rinsed the knife in that filthy water, and carefully, stroke by stroke, shaved.

I rinsed my face, braced myself, and looked up again.

That same gaze was still there, waiting for me.

I turned my head slightly, trying to get a better look.

Still not me.

But now… now he at least resembled the man I once was.

Just a few days ago.

Angelique tried again.

I find it utterly charming to watch her so focused.

It was the fourth time she attempted to play the same piece without, as she put it, making a mistake. I stood nearby now, much closer than before, watching her slender fingers glide over the piano keys. It was so… comforting.

With a single blink, those white wings appeared on her back. They were so close, within reach. Maybe that was the perfect moment to stretch out my hand and touch them—but doing so would interrupt her performance. I couldn't bring myself to do that. Resigned, I turned to the window, and the glass returned my reflection. That slightly thin face, still with dark circles, a scar, and a faint smile…

That was me.

"Ah…"

The final note rang out, followed by Angelique's soft sigh. I turned back to her, and, as I'd expected, her wings had vanished.

"That sounded good."

“Yeah… I didn’t mess up this time. The tempo could use some work, but…”

“But?”

“But it’s an improvement. Still, I need to keep practicing.”

“Hm… well, I don’t think Franz Grillparzer became a master by skipping meals to practice. I’m hungry, Angelique, let’s…”

Angel slowly turned her head to look up at me with a hint of confusion, tinged with a faint trace of disapproval. She thought for a moment, brought a hand to her chin, and then tilted her head slightly to the side.

“Alez…”

“What?”

“Wasn’t it Schubert?”

“Hm? Who?”

Her eyebrows arched outward. Uncertain of her own conclusion, but clearly convinced that I was wrong.

“Grillparzer was a writer. I think… I think you meant Franz Schubert. He was the musician.”

I pressed my lips together tightly. I had no idea whether she was right or not, but the confidence in her tone made me feel like a fool.

“Eh…”

“Pff…”

She lowered her head and tried her best not to laugh. I bit my tongue and gave her a weak but audible pat on the back.

“Yeah, I guess. I don’t care—I’m neither a musician nor a writer. Can we go eat now?”

She managed to compose herself and stood in front of me, still letting out a choppy laugh with every breath.

“Y-yes, let’s go. I… I’ll cook today, Alez.”

“Whatever you want…”

With a noisy—and I’m sure deliberately exaggerated—sigh, relishing the pleasure of having ‘won’ yet again, she straightened her posture and looked up at me. Those eyes, as dull as they were brimming with life, looked into mine with a warmth that was uniquely hers.

“What do you feel like eating today, Alez?”

Chapter Twenty-two: Solo IV

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December, 2024

Both my hands were tied behind my back. The rigid backrest of that rusted metal chair dug into the top of my spine, making every movement unbearable. I ran my tongue across my lower lip and tasted a sharp, metallic bitterness. My entire face throbbed, and I was almost certain it looked utterly mangled. I tried to let out a groan, but the dryness in my throat only worsened the pain each time I attempted to make a sound. Some dripping echoed through the room, but neither the dim lighting nor the swelling around my eyes allowed me to pinpoint where it came from.

A rough punch to my left cheekbone knocked me out for a split second, and the only thing keeping me from collapsing was the rope holding my midsection against the seat. My gaze fell to the ground, where

countless drops of blood lay scattered—my blood. Some still wet, others already dried. Letting my vision climb up my own body, I could see those same stains speckling my bare feet and pants. Struggling to breathe, I lifted my head. It took considerable effort to bring my surroundings back into focus.

A bald man was massaging the knuckles of his right hand, muttering curses under his breath. There were three of them in total, each with a firearm holstered at their waist. They took turns beating me. The most vicious among them carried a Colt .45—I remember that clearly.

Another blow, this time to the opposite cheek. Then to my jaw, and again to my gut. I spat a vile mix of saliva, blood, and bile onto my thighs. I wasn’t even given a moment to catch my breath—his hand grabbed me by the hair and yanked me upright again.

“You’re going to kill him, Rico.”

“I’ll kill him if he doesn’t talk.”

“Then put a bullet in his skull already and stop wasting our time. Easier to say he didn’t tell us anything and be done with it. We’ve been at this nearly two days.”

“No… not yet!”

Another fist smashed into my face. No one had ever hit me as hard as that son of a bitch. He struck so forcefully it felt like each blow shaved hours off my life.

The third man, stationed near the room’s only entrance, sighed as he watched me spit blood once

more. His face was marked with scars, and a wool cap sat on his head. Then he spoke.

“He doesn’t know anything.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Look at him. Almost forty-eight hours of nonstop questioning. No food, no water, no rest. All he’s managed to produce are insults, groans, vomit, and blood.”

Rico grabbed me by the fringe, jerking my head back, ready to hit again.

“These stateless soldiers have no loyalty, Rico. If he really knew something, he would’ve given up his comrades’ location long ago.”

My gaze drifted from the bald one to the scarred man. I summoned all the strength I had and spoke.

“You… you were… Laurent, right? I’m not… stateless.”

Rico released my hair only to deliver a kick to my chest with the sole of his boot, knocking me to the floor along with the chair. I coughed violently, turning my head to avoid choking on my own fluids.

“I already told you not to speak unless it’s something we want to hear!”

As I struggled to reclaim the air ripped from my lungs, a sudden torrent of filthy water was dumped over my head.

“Enough, Rico.”

The second man had approached while I was distracted. He tossed aside the empty bucket and lifted my chair, setting me upright again. I watched Rico back away, grumbling, while I began licking the water dripping down my face—I needed moisture desperately.

“Let’s make this easier.”

“We’re not ordered to kill him, Flavio.”

“I’m not going to kill him. He’s going to kill himself.”

That second man was thinner than the others. Pale, with dark hair and oddly colored eyes—almost gray.

“You gave us your name earlier. Alex?”

He found a small stool and sat in front of me, barely a meter away.

“…Alez.”

“Right, Alez. Listen, Alez, you’re not the only one sick of this. We came back from a long, messy mission, and just when we thought we’d get a break, the Ahri politely asked us to come have a chat with you.”

“Flavio!”

“Relax, Laurent. Let me handle this.”

I didn’t yet understand what had caused the man with the wool cap to tense up so suddenly.

“If it were up to me, you’d be rotting in a ditch by now. Sadly, my colleagues and I don’t share the same views. However… they’ve had their shot at making you talk.”

He looked at the other two. Neither returned his stare.

“Luckily for me, the Ahri trusts me more than those two. So we all know that if I choose to get rid of you, the boss won’t be too bothered. What I’m saying is…”

Through my blurred vision, Flavio unholstered his revolver and swung open the cylinder. Empty.

“You’ll be the one to decide how this interrogation ends.”

“…”

“This next question is on the house. Do you want me to kill you right now and put an end to this? It’ll be fast, painless—and we all get to go home happy.”

Eyes fixed on the weapon in his hands, I slowly shook my head. He nodded.

“Good. Then let’s begin.”

He set the revolver down and reached into one of the side pockets of his combat trousers. After a moment of rummaging, he pulled out two bullets—identical to the eye. He held them up, showing me, then kept one in each hand.

“Only one of these has a live primer. Choose. Your fate is in your own hands, Alez.”

I sat there, dumbfounded. I couldn’t tell whether this was just another twisted trick to get me to talk, or if he truly intended to end me in such a vile manner. I looked back and forth between the two rounds, searching for anything that might set them apart, any detail that could tip me off as to which one was live. But in my condition, nothing registered.

Flavio’s expression was blank, lifeless—like someone comparing prices at an electronics store.

“What’s the matter? Should I choose for you?”

“Left one.”

I said it, then swallowed hard. Sweat began to trickle down my face, mixing with grime and blood. As I watched him slide the round into the chamber, my hands began to thrash against the restraints of their own accord. My feet kicked with desperate instinct, as though some part of me still believed I could launch myself at him and stop all this. I hadn't come this far just to die over a sick game.

He closed the cylinder and lowered the hammer with such calmness it made me want to scream. Then, without ceremony, he rested the grip of the revolver on his knee, the barrel pointed directly at my head.

"Here's how this works. I'll ask you a question. You answer. If you hesitate or I think you're lying, I pull the trigger. At that point, whether you live or die will depend solely on your own decision. You get one life to use if you think you're fucking up. Use it wisely."

“Sick… You’re… sick.”

“First question.”

Laurent and Rico looked disinterested, clearly unfazed. They’d seen this routine more times than they could count.

“Who are you? I want the full story.”

“…”

“Speak!”

I bit down hard, forcing my lips to stop trembling. Then let my voice spill out.

“Alez Braviel. Twenty-four. Austrian. U-until two years ago, I served in the Austrian army. We were stationed at a base in Italy w-when… Amere forces attacked. Almost everyone died. Maybe all of them. I don’t know. I ran. S-since then, I’ve been alone. Just trying to find food, somewhere to hide. I __”

The hammer snapped down.

There was no blast. No bullet. My lungs seized, and I only managed to breathe again once the muzzle drifted away from my forehead.

“A-ah…”

I slumped against the chair, gasping. There wasn’t a single muscle in my body that wasn’t shaking. My teeth clattered, my breath came in erratic bursts. I didn’t know whether to feel relieved

I was still alive or terrified that the questioning was far from over.

“Lucky bastard…”

Flavio opened the revolver and let the dud fall to the ground. Then took out two more bullets and repeated the process.

“N-no. Stop. You’re insane. This is madness, it’s __”

“Do you want it over with?”

“No! That’s not it!”

“Choose.”

I couldn’t look at the bullets anymore. I met his gaze instead and spoke in the weakest voice I’d ever heard from my own throat.

“Right one…”

Bullet loaded. Back to his previous position.

“I don’t buy that you were just looking for food. If you’re not stateless, that means you chose a side during that clash. How do you explain that?”

I swallowed and began again. The words spilled out so quickly, even I could barely follow them.

“I-I saw a chance! Saw they were losing and—no, from the beginning. I was near Belgrade and

heard gunfire. I moved closer, saw both sides were low on numbers. From what I know, the stateless tend to have better weapons. I just thought—kill a few Amere, grab supplies, and vanish. They'd think their guys died in the fight, wouldn't chase me. It's… it's survival logic, that's all. I took down two… maybe three, who were isolated. Took their stuff. Left. I didn't—"

The hammer dropped again. That chilling sound froze my entire body. I let out a strangled cry, cursed under my breath, and lifted my face to the ceiling as I exhaled all the air in my chest.

"Twice in a row. Impressive."

Without pause, Flavio reloaded. I needed time before I could even speak again.

"… Right one."

“Okay then… your story matches parts of the mission reports, but there’s one inconsistency. Alez, you killed seven Amere soldiers. Apparently on your own. That’s no small feat. Makes us think you had help—maybe one or two others.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Laurent light a cigarette.

“Or… maybe your soldiers are just that useless.”

I don’t know where I found the courage to say it. But Flavio only snorted, nodded, and loaded another round.

“That’s a possibility too.”

This time, he aimed straight at my face.

“Third question. If you’re so skilled in combat, why not target the stateless directly? You said it yourself—they’re better armed. If you wanted supplies, taking down a couple of them from behind was the smarter move.”

“…”

I knew what he was trying. No answer would satisfy him. It was a trap. If I lied, I’d have to build a whole story to back it up—and that story would be what gave me away. There was no way out of this one. The revolver’s muzzle blurred in my vision, and all I could focus on were those grayish eyes, brimming with contempt.

I exhaled.

“Because I enjoy killing your kind.”

Flavio smiled after a few seconds.

“I use the life!”

I said it, barely audible.

He turned the barrel away and fired. The bang was deafening—but it only brought me relief. I was still alive, just stunned.

“Now luck’s all you’ve got left, Alez.”

He reached for two more rounds—but a knock at the wooden door stopped him cold.

Laurent raised his head, glanced toward the others.

“We weren’t expecting anyone.”

“Then…”

“Open it.”

Laurent flicked the cigarette to the floor and crushed it under his boot. He grasped the handle and opened the door slowly… his expression changed instantly upon seeing who stood outside.

“Ahri…”

Both he and Rico straightened, suddenly more alert. Flavio only sat up slightly, a minimal gesture of respect.

“Come to check on the interrogation, sir?”

“Something like that.”

The voice behind the door was young—but rough. When Laurent stepped aside, a fourth man entered. He was short, lean but wiry, with tanned skin and brown hair. His green eyes were piercing. A strange sight—one glance and you knew he had to be in his thirties, though neither his voice nor his build betrayed it.

Almost ignoring the others, the man—wearing a black floral shirt and matching slim trousers—walked straight past Flavio and up to me.

“Fuh… look at you. Thought I told you to be gentle, Flavio.”

“He wouldn’t talk, so we had to escalate.”

The one they called Ahri scanned me with the look of someone finding a stray dog on the street.

“I heard the shot. You’re playing that game again?”

“It’s effective. Thanks to that, he finally shared a few potentially useful details.”

“You’re sick, man.”

Ahri patted Flavio’s shoulder. The man gave a quiet sigh and rose from his seat, making way for his superior.

He sat across from me, posture relaxed—almost defenseless. His eyes skimmed my injuries, and he let out a long breath. Then he spoke—not to me.

“You beat him to pieces… I’m guessing that was Rico. Animal. You’ve got no restraint.”

Rico scratched his shoulder in silence, unwilling to protest.

“You didn’t feed him either, did you? It’s a miracle he’s still conscious.”

“We…”

The Ahri looked at Laurent, who replied with feigned indifference.

“We kept him hungry. And thirsty. It—”

“‘It would break him eventually,’ right?”

Ahri finished his sentence, and Laurent exhaled through his nose.

“Idiots. Can’t you tell just by looking?”

He grabbed me by the fringe and lifted my head. I met his eyes—and he seemed almost pleased by the dull emptiness in mine.

“This guy’s been broken. He was broken *before* Rico even touched him. If anything made him speak, it was the fear of dying like a dog. In that case…”

He let go and wiped his hand on his pants.

“You could’ve made him talk from the start without turning him into this wreck. Savages. Inefficient.”

None of them reacted, nor took offense, likely used to this kind of reprimand. The Ahri turned his head, gave them a single motion with his hand—and that was all it took for the three to head for the door.

“I’ll take it from here. If anyone comes in before I say so, you’re all on bread and water for a month.”

And they left. Silence fell. For nearly a minute, the Ahri stared at the door. I started to grow uneasy. Just as I clicked my tongue in frustration, he spoke.

“Rico, if you’re still listening, I swear I’ll cut off your damn ear.”

I heard footsteps retreat in haste, and couldn’t help but feel a flicker of admiration—not for the fear he inspired, but for how he knew *exactly* who had stayed behind to eavesdrop.

Finally, he turned in the chair and looked at me, eyes lit with the curiosity of a child eager to discover what his new toy could do.

“Viktor Bahramian.”

I didn’t answer. I had no idea what to say, though it was clear he had just told me his name. So casually. So indifferently. In that moment, the last trace of adrenaline drained from my veins, leaving behind a sharp, searing ache across every nerve ending in my body. But… it didn’t matter. The man’s demeanor was so strange, it consumed all my attention.

“Alez… Alez Braviel.”

A wide grin curved his lips when he heard it, and something in his expression told me it wasn’t mere appreciation for my cooperation.

“Alez… good. Nice name. Short, easy to recall. There’s a guy on base named Llewellyn—avoid him whenever I can. I loathe that name.”

It wasn’t like he was trying to make the mood any lighter. He just… spoke. Said whatever crossed his mind. Acted however he pleased. As if the world itself belonged to him.

“Forget your surname. It no longer matters. It never will.”

“Does yours?”

“For some, yes. But you didn’t flinch when I said it, so I suppose you can disregard it as well.”

“What do you mean by—?”

“Alez.”

That assertive, though not commanding, tone made me straighten instinctively—like a dog reacting to its master's voice.

"Alez… seven."

"…"

"No, you didn't kill seven of ours."

"It was… only seven."

"No, no…"

He suddenly sprang to his feet and kicked his chair aside. It crashed against the wall with a bang

that echoed through the room, lingering until his voice reclaimed dominance.

“It was far more than seven. Dozens, I’d bet. You’ve done it repeatedly over the years, wearing us down grain by grain, like… hmm… a termite gnawing at the leg of a chair, unaware it might collapse if it just bit deep enough… or stayed hungry long enough.”

“…”

“How many?”

“…”

“Alez, don’t go silent now.”

He crouched before me, eyes fixed somewhere on my face, unfocused.

“This is just a talk between… near friends, Alez. You’ve got nothing to hide.”

“Friends…? What the hell are you saying?”

“Ah, Alez…”

Clicking his tongue in disappointment, he rose and tapped his boot twice against the floor. He stood still for a few seconds, scratching his nose, mumbling something, then slowly began to circle me.

“Alright, let’s change the question.”

“I don’t follow…”

“What do you think I’m going to do with you?”

“Kill me once you’ve gotten what you need.”

“Is that what *you* did? To an Amere, maybe?”

I swallowed, unsure if I should answer. But he beat me to it before I could part my lips.

“You *did*, didn’t you? You’re rotting from the inside, Alez.”

There was no mockery in his voice, no provocation—only genuine astonishment.

“No, that’s not what I intend. Tell me, what good would it do me to kill you?”

“Eliminate a threat… I guess.”

A low chuckle rumbled from his throat before he continued.

“A threat? You honestly believe you’re a danger to us, Alez? Maybe… maybe you were in *that* moment, in *that* situation, to those unlucky enough to fall under your crosshairs. But to *me*? To Amere? Alez…”

He patted my shoulder twice from behind.

“You’re not a threat; you’re not even a nuisance.”

His voice grew nearer, and I felt a chill crawl up my spine. I could hear his steps, feel the heat of his breath beside my ear.

“So tell me, Alez. How many of ours did you put down?”

“A… dozens.”

“Dozens?”

“Maybe… maybe a hundred…”

“Over a hundred, huh…? Alez, you’re a real killer. A pure machine built for taking lives.”

He gave me one last pat and walked back to recover his chair.

I could only sit there, staring at him, repeating those words I'd just confessed. It wasn't like I hadn't thought about it before. Pulling the trigger that first time had been agonizing, but after that… I'd taken so many more. Sure, I didn't feel guilt over… most of them. But that didn't mean the weight on my back had lifted.

He sat down again, directly across from me.

"That's your worth."

"My… worth?"

"Yes, your worth. It's the value I assign you. As a soldier. As a beast. You took down hundreds of my

men. In one way or another, you surpassed each of them. That alone makes you valuable to me."

"Many died from behind. Many were ambushed."

"So what? You're still here, talking, breathing, while they're rotting underground. That's the only thing that matters now, Alez."

I dropped my gaze to the floor, staring at both our feet.

"I think… I think I get it. You're… you're insane."

"No, I'm not crazy. I just know how to make the most of what life hands me. Letting you go would mean wasting the strength of, let's say, a hundred men. But if…"

This time, he didn’t grab me by the hair. He lifted me by the arms, like someone helping up a teammate who’s lost the will to stand.

“If you join us, then I’ve gained the might of a hundred and one. Doesn’t that sound like a fair trade?”

“You heard me speak. I *hate* Amere. I hate you, your team, your subordinates, and I’d put a bullet through your skull if I had the chance.”

“Ha! That may be true. But I don’t need your love, Alez. I just need you to fight for me—and with the right incentives, you *will* fight for me.”

“Yeah, I was right. You’re out of your mind. Sick. A complete lunatic…”

“You’ll change your mind. You won’t stop hating me—I know that—but you’ll come to realize that… no, you already *have*.”

He let me lean back against the chair again and walked to the door, with the relaxed air of a man wandering through his garden on a summer afternoon.

“It’s far more useful to hate this world than to hate me—the one giving you a chance to stop living like a stray.”

With his hand on the doorknob, he spoke without turning.

“I’ll come back later. I need to eat. The guys will return too, but don’t worry—they won’t hit you. I just need someone watching you. After all… it’d be

a hassle if you tried to kill yourself by biting your tongue, or pulling some other dumb stunt."

And then he left, his words still echoing against the walls, while I remained behind—drained, defeated, and utterly broken beneath forces I couldn't begin to fight.

. . .

He wasn't wrong. At least, that's what I felt then. If I tried to be practical, it was no lie—the world, in its current state, was far, *far* more deserving of hatred than he was. Or even Amere.

Sure, Amere was the main architect of this disaster, no doubt about that, but I couldn't place the blame solely on them. The stateless, the bandits, the soldiers who had betrayed their countries—Amere had no hand in creating them. They chose, of their own will, to align with darkness, to cling to existence by becoming part of it. I wasn't exempt

either—my hands had committed atrocities in the name of survival.

I could hate Amere, I could despise the stateless, loathe the bandits, curse the traitorous troops, revile myself… or I could hate the world itself, as a vessel in which all that rot simmered. What *was* the world, if not the boiling pot that contained every last drop of filth? Experience had taught me that living in such a place was a impossible; the best I could hope for was to survive another day.

I didn’t plan on softening my hatred for Amere, but I *could* use it—just as they could use me. A twisted exchange, irredeemable and immoral, that would make me one more among those I detested. To walk alongside the ones who killed my friends, who tore me from everything I ever loved or respected… the ones who stole my future.

How much heavier—or lighter—would the burden become, if I accepted their offer? Roaming

alone, trusting no one, had already turned me into an enemy of my own ideals. What difference would it make to join Amere? How much worse could it really get?

Had I known the answer back then, I might not be where I am today.

There was no one left to hold me accountable. No family to whom I could prove my integrity, no friends to disappoint, no nation to serve, no God to beg forgiveness from. I was alone. And if that was the case… then why not take a step forward into the abyss, a place where no one would judge my actions? With no one to let down, there was no one left to impress. What an empty life… but what freedom it held. Amere… what did Amere even mean anymore? Would I lose my name? Would I cease to be myself?

The water pooled on the floor offered me a dim reflection, in that half-lit room that seemed to mirror

the same pressure the future placed upon my chest.

. . .

I wanted to live.

. . .

I don’t know how many more days I spent in that room.

The Ahri hadn’t lied: I wasn’t struck again, not even mistreated.

They fed me, gave me water, even blindfolded me and led me to a washroom to clean myself.

Eventually, they removed all restraints and let me move freely within the confines of that room.

He visited often—several times a day. He'd ask me about my past, my skills, my preferences, and in return, he'd share a little about himself. Though his side of the exchange always stayed shallow: his favorite dish, the kind of music he enjoyed.

He started opening up more the day I told him about Zara's death.

"Ah, the raid on the base in Trento! Yeah, I remember that. Funny thing is, I wanted to lead that op, but they gave it to someone else. If they'd listened to me, it wouldn't have ended in such a mess."

"… A mess?"

“Hm? Of course—a complete disaster. The idiot they put in charge underestimated the speed of the enemy reinforcements. Ours didn’t arrive in time, and we had to pull out.”

I remember looking at him from my chair, probably with a face that couldn’t quite follow where he was going. He laughed and went on.

“Though I’m guessing you were long gone by then. You’ve got terrible luck. Still, it delivered a crushing blow to what little resistance the Italians had left. We won in the end, but… tch, I just hate knowing I could’ve done it better. If *I* had been the one giving orders, you wouldn’t be alive to hear this now.”

Laurent, leaning in the corner with a cigarette hanging from his mouth, let out a puff and scoffed. The Ahri noticed and shifted the topic just slightly.

“You know? That sad bastard over there’s got a story a lot like yours.”

Laurent choked on his own smoke.

“We found him bleeding in a police station somewhere south of Belgium, two of our men dead at his feet. He was the last one standing from his whole unit. Hey, Laurent, you remember that?”

“’Course I do…”

He muttered through his teeth, wiping at watery eyes with a handkerchief, the smoke getting to him.

“Covered in blood, down on the ground, waving a knife at us and swearing he’d carve us up if we got close. He was easy to win over. Much easier than you, anyway.”

I said nothing.

“That was… what, two years ago?”

“Two years and three months.”

“Right. Two years and three months.”

My gaze shifted from Laurent to the Ahri, then back again. I hesitated, then spoke.

“Can I have a cigarette?”

The two of them exchanged glances—one of those silent conversations that don’t need words.

The Ahri smiled, and Laurent stepped forward, placing a single cigarette and a lighter in my hands.

I lit it, inhaling the smoke deep into my lungs.

Back then, I didn’t understand what that expression on the Ahri’s face meant.He walked up, clapped a hand on my shoulder, and said he’d return at nightfall.

. . .

The next day, I stepped out of the room without a blindfold over my eyes. Flanked by Laurent and Rico, I walked down the corridor of what I now recognized as the basement of a school. They led me up a staircase, and sunlight poured in through the windows—light I once believed I’d never see again.

I passed many unfamiliar faces, though none of them paid me much attention. Members of Amere moved back and forth, some carrying crates of ammunition or supplies, others armed and likely heading out to man a post.

I nearly smiled at the irony when they guided me through a door labeled *Principal*, and there, seated behind the desk, was the Ahri, flipping through a book whose title I didn't bother to remember.

"Good morning, Alez. Did you manage to get some rest? I told these two last night to leave a mattress in your room so you could sleep more comfortably. Did they?"

"They did."

"Good. If you'd said no, I was going to make Laurent bite Rico in the balls as punishment."

He set the book down on the desk and stood. Moving to the window behind him, he pulled the curtains halfway shut.

“Alright, straight to it. I’m being called to… another base, Alez. Serbia’s lovely, but they need me in France. I have to go, and I’m taking those three friends of yours with me.”

He turned to face me. I mirrored the gesture, but to my surprise, neither Rico nor Laurent were anywhere in the room anymore.

“I want to take *you* with me too, Alez. Leaving you to rot here would be a waste—and I *hate* decisions that lead nowhere. Worse still, I loathe indecision even more.”

There was something different in his eyes, in his tone. I think that was the moment I finally understood who Viktor was—and who *the Ahri* truly was.

“I know you well enough. I’ve learned from you all I needed—and maybe a bit more. I have no doubts left. You’re going to join us, Alez.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but he cut me off.

His boots struck the wooden floor as he strode forward. I was taller, but in front of him, I felt like an insect staring up at a giant.

“No, that’s not what I mean. You couldn’t care less about Amere; you don’t know or give a shit about our cause, and by now you don’t even care whether we win or lose. You’ve got no one left to fight for. So, Alez, allow me—just this once—to

make you a formal offer: come with me. Join Amere's ranks, but fight *for me*. Become part of my personal guard. Take orders from no one but me. I'm not asking you to be another soldier—no, far from it. I want you at my back, ready to draw your weapon and pull the trigger the moment you hear my voice."

He extended a hand toward me, that same carefree smile on his face—the kind worn by a man whose hand is a poker of aces.

"You'll be one among thousands, and that's the treatment you'll get. All I ask in return is your skill and your loyalty. That hatred in your chest—that hatred for the world—let it shape a better future."

I thought of a thousand things I could say. I imagined hitting him, throwing him to the floor, strangling him with my bare hands. I pictured the aftermath—his blood and mine mixing beneath our feet. I thought about everything it had taken to get to this point. About every person I'd shot. About every

fight I'd run from. I remembered each garbage heap I dug through for scraps of food, every empty bottle I placed outside my shelters to catch rainwater.

And I came to the most selfish conclusion a man can reach: If the world's already lost, then there's no point in fighting for it—and there's no sin in making it worse if it means securing a warm bed and a full stomach.

I clasped his hand.

Out of the corner of my eye, for just a second, I saw Zara and David's faces fading into the darkness of the future that waited for me.

The Ahri nodded slowly, signing his name in the book of my life.

“Welcome to *Ameretat*, Alez.”

. . .

May, 2031

“It’s the last one!”

“Surround him! Don’t let him leave the restaurant!”

Angelique obeyed the order with lightning speed and vanished from sight. I swapped the magazine on my G36 and peeked over the hood of the car I was using for cover. Across the street, I saw the restaurant door slam shut behind the last of the six bandits, who was desperately trying to escape, throwing chairs and tables out of his way. I tried to line up my sights, but the tinted glass blurred the

view. I could've fired anyway, but I didn't want to reveal my position without a clear shot.

Silence fell for a moment, then was broken by the noise of Angelique's Rattler, followed by two shotgun blasts. I felt reassured hearing Angel's weapon again seconds after.

Movement stirred inside the restaurant once more; I realized my partner had effectively cut off our target's escape through the back door. Probably unaware of where I was, the bandit stood still, staring out the windows, maybe planning a new route. I knew I wouldn't get a better chance, so I raised my rifle and opened fire. Several holes appeared in the glass, and moments later I heard a muffled scream. For a second, I thought it was over —but then an explosion shattered the silence, and pellets rained down, hitting the vehicle. I threw myself to the pavement, seeking cover.

"Son of a bitch! Angelique! You hear me?!"

“Yes!”

“He’s wounded but still shooting!”

I didn’t want to give him time to think. Unsure of his exact position, I crawled around to the other side of the car and peeked out to keep firing. I saw Angelique hidden behind one of the restaurant’s side walls, alert for any chance to enter and finish the target up close. She must have spotted something because she opened fire without hesitation and ducked back just before the enemy shot again. Maybe he didn’t expect her bullets to weaken the glass enough for his powerful close-range shotgun blast to punch a huge hole in the window—giving me a clear shot to finally end the intense firefight.

I squeezed the trigger and didn’t stop until at least ten rounds had gone off. I heard no cry, but I saw the shotgun fall awkwardly to the floor. When I stood, Angelique emerged from cover and peeked inside

the restaurant with her weapon’s barrel first, delivering the coup de grâce before I could get there.

I heard her uneven breaths as I got by her side, watching the red mess the bandit had become. I placed a hand on her shoulder to calm her. She turned to me, lowering her rifle.

“That was the last one, right? Good job.”

“Yeah, you too…”

She nodded weakly and took a deep breath, keeping her eyes fixed on me. Returning her gaze, I noticed a small cut on her cheek, a thin trickle of blood running down to her chin.

“What’s this?”

I said, wiping the blood away with my thumb.

“Oh, it happened back there. I had to drop to the ground for cover, and I think I got it when I fell. It’s nothing, doesn’t hurt.”

“Doesn’t hurt…?”

She shook her head, the ponytail tied at her nape swaying slightly.

“… but we’ll disinfect it anyway, just to be safe.”

She nodded and looked toward the unlucky bandit who had crossed paths with us while we scouted that part of the city.

“I’ll check his pockets and backpack. Alez, I think one of the other bandits had a 5.56—I’ll go get it. We could—”

“No.”

“Alez?”

“We’re leaving. We’re too far from home. It’s been a long time since we ventured this far, and we don’t know if others are nearby.”

She thought about arguing for a moment but understood my point and followed without hesitation.

Back home, it was near midday. Our weapons and coats lay on the table, and we both wore lighter clothes. Kneeling on the floor, I rubbed alcohol over

Angelique’s wound as she sat on the sofa, closing her eyes tightly against the sting.

“Be more careful next time.”

“Yeah…”

I put a small piece of medical tape over the cut and pressed it gently with my thumbs.

“Alez…”

“Yes?”

“Have you noticed…?”

“That the city isn’t as quiet as it used to be?”

“Yes…”

“Yeah, the groups seem to come from the north. I don’t know what happened up there, but the last four or five groups of bandits all came from the same direction. Maybe there was some displacement, or a commune fell and its members started roaming. I don’t know, but we’ll have to be more careful.”

She touched the wound with her fingertips and asked timidly,

“Are we… going to have to move?”

“I hope not, but I won’t rule it out.”

“I see…”

I stood and stretched until my back cracked.

“I’ll prepare lunch. You rest until it’s ready. You did good today.”

“Can I help?”

She said, watching me as I walked away. I stroked her head before leaving.

“If you want.”

Chapter Twenty-three: Angelique XI

+

Late June, 2031

“Aren’t those too many clothes for just a pouch of tobacco and a couple of bottles?”

“Neither liquor nor tobacco comes cheap, Alez. You already knew that.”

“Yeah, sure, but this deal isn’t fair.”

“Hm… what do you suggest?”

“Two pouches of tobacco, and I want six cans of tuna.”

“No one would take that deal…”

“Really? I think anyone who took a closer look at these clothes would agree with their eyes shut.”

I stepped toward the table in front of me and picked up a sweater at random from the pile scattered across it. I held it by the collar, making a rough show of the fabric’s thickness.

“It’s not easy to find clothes of this quality out there. This is comfortable and warm. I won’t just hand it over. Getting through winter without any heating is easier with clothes this good.”

“I’m not denying the quality, but summer’s coming. I don’t need it now. If you bring it back in a couple of months…”

“In a couple of months, when you actually need it, I’ll ask for several bottles for just one coat. I won’t be as generous as I am now.”

“You…”

The woman across the table let out a huff, planting her hands on her hips as she muttered a curse in a language I didn’t understand.

“Do you have to be so mean?”

“I’m not mean. I’m warning you prices will go up. I wouldn’t do that if I were mean.”

“Surely you’ve got more clothes than you could ever wear. Knowing how much we need them here…”

Irena placed another pouch of tobacco and the requested cans on her side of the table.

“It’s not personal, Irena. I don’t have much else to trade besides these clothes, so I have to squeeze as much out of them as I can. Unless you’re interested in books, of course. I’ve got thousands of those…”

“You’re not even a good trader; you just take advantage…”

“So, do we have a deal?”

“Ugh… yeah, yeah, we have a deal.”

She took all the clothes I’d brought from the mansion in that old travel bag I’d found rummaging through the rooms. I did my part, stashing the goods I’d acquired in the same bag.

“You didn’t take much food today.”

“We found a restaurant’s storage in the northwest of the city. It was locked, untouched since they evacuated the place.”

“Only you guys get that kind of luck.”

“Most of it was spoiled. We salvaged what we could, and it turned out to be plenty. We’ll have food for a while.”

It was a calm mid-morning. The sky was clear, not too hot, and five people had greeted me warmly when I entered the commune. I went straight to Irena's house, a place where I'd traded many times before. It wasn't exactly a deal or an agreement, but whenever I needed to barter, I went to her. If she didn't want what I brought, I'd turn to the other traders.

It's one of the best houses around. Two stories, a pristine white exterior with intricate wooden carvings, and a beautiful front garden. Irena is a woman… how to put it… she maintains this air of high-class elegance despite her limited means. It's admirable, if you ask me.

"Got anything else?"

"Nah, I traveled light today. Got exactly what I needed, so I won't be back for a couple of weeks."

“How’s that girl doing?”

“Interested in Angelique?”

“Of course I am. With how careless you are, you probably don’t think about these things, but you should get her some nicer clothes to wear. Maybe some makeup or accessories, I’ve got…”

“I don’t think she’d care for that.”

“You don’t even give her the chance, poor thing…”

I let out a short, dry laugh.

“With all the clothes we have at home, if she really wanted to try something different, she’d do it without asking me. She’s practical; she only likes what’s comfortable to move in. If you knew her better…”

“But I can’t know her better.”

“…guess not.”

“Why didn’t you bring her today?”

“One of her guns jammed during a skirmish we had not long ago. She stayed back to figure out why.”

“Skirmish? Oh… I thought I heard gunshots a couple of days ago. Was that you?”

“Probably. We ran into two bandits near our place. It wasn’t a big deal. There’ve been a lot of bandits lately; we’ve had to double our patrols and plan a new route.”

“You patrol?”

“Twice a week.”

Irena’s gaze drifted to the nearest window, where the warm glow of a spring morning streamed in. She sighed and turned away. We were in her living room, and behind her stood a cabinet adorned with trinkets and, curiously, rows of books lined up side by side.

“Now I get it…”

“…”

“Was that your real goal?”

“Yeah, it was.”

“Why not just say so? Did you think I’d ask for something in return?”

“It’s only logical.”

I watched her bend down to open a drawer at the bottom of the cabinet; my hands rested on the table.

“You come by here all the time, Alez. I wouldn’t charge you for that information.”

“Well… thanks.”

“Besides.”

She turned back to face me, dropping a heavy, hardcover book on the table. The dust it kicked up forced me to squint.

“Besides?”

“I would’ve told you anyway. I told you, I’m worried about Angelique.”

“Angelique…”

“I don’t think you’re a bad companion for her. It’s just… a girl her age… this isn’t the life she

should be living.”

I couldn’t say anything, because I felt exactly the same way.

“So… what you want to know is why there’s been a sudden spike in activity in the city, right?”

“Yeah. It’s not like the place is crawling with people, but looters and bandits are getting more common. It’s strange. I’d expect the opposite, so there must be something else…”

“There is something else. Got a cigarette?”

“You smoke?”

“Sometimes.”

I pulled a cigarette for each of us from my case and handed her my lighter. Soon, smoke from both our lungs curled toward the ceiling.

“You wouldn’t know this, but Kaliningrad turned into—”

“A state-commune.”

Irena looked surprised before giving a faint, almost pitying smile.

“Yeah, it was.”

“Was?”

“It fell.”

A silence settled, broken only by the sound of Irena inhaling from her cigarette, followed by a sigh and a slight click of her tongue.

“I don’t know the details, but there was some kind of intervention orchestrated from Moscow. Everything built there was destroyed in a matter of months. If you headed that way today, you’d find the whole area surrounded by Russian soldiers who’d shoot you on sight without asking.”

“But… why?”

“How would I know? I only hear what the Amere folks talk about among themselves. It’s probably strategic, or they’re reclaiming as much territory as

they can, or… I don’t know, and it doesn’t really matter.”

“So, those bandits…”

“They’re all people who fled Kaliningrad. We’re not immune to the problem either; we’ve been caught up in a few conflicts because of this. And this is just the first wave. From what we hear from Amere, most of these refugees ended up in Bydgoszcz, Pila, and Lodz. It’s chaotic, and it’s expected they’ll spread across the continent. You can imagine, if they want to head west…”

“They’ll almost certainly come through here.”

“I’m afraid so. We’re talking thousands and thousands of people, Alez. Kaliningrad wasn’t just a commune like this one. A state-commune is… on another level. Thousands of people in a commune

that functions like a city did before the war. Ioannina, Comrat, Bruges…”

“Sicily.”

She turned her head to look at me, nodding slowly, holding the cigarette to her lips.

“Yeah… like Sicily.”

“What will you do?”

“Aleksej wants to ask Amere for help. With how things are, it wouldn’t be surprising if they sent a team to stay here until things settle down.”

“Do you think Amere would go that far to help you?”

“We’re an important commune. Well… maybe more so before than now. Let’s just say we were the lookout post before Kaliningrad. We passed on all the information we gathered every couple of weeks. I don’t know if Amere plans to retake the state-commune, but I doubt they want to lose all their influence in the area. They’ll help us.”

I clicked my tongue and sighed. The smoke I exhaled clouded my vision for a moment.

“I guess… that doesn’t thrill you much.”

Irena said with a slight teasing tone. I don’t know what my lack of reaction stirred in her, but she huffed and placed her hands on the table.

“Are you ever going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“What you did before you had that girl with you.”

“…”

“I’m not stupid, Alez. From the first time I saw you, I knew you had something to do with Amere.”

“I don’t—”

“Yes, you do. Were you a Captain? I don’t think you were just a soldier. You talk about things with a confidence most of those kids don’t even know exist.”

“Why do you care so much? It’s in the past.”

“Alez.”

She stubbed her cigarette out on the table and let it fall to the floor, hardly the action I’d expect from someone as refined as Irena.

“Alez, I’m the second most… I’m the most important person in this commune. I don’t dislike you, or that girl, but I have a role to fulfill.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“You know exactly what. Alez, if you’re… someone important who ended up deserting…”

I saw Irena’s chest rise and fall slowly. She stared at me, leaving no room to doubt the gravity of what she was about to say.

“You could be the reason this commune is reduced to rubble and all its members executed.”

I couldn’t find words to respond in that moment. I took a drag from my cigarette and looked away, partly intimidated by those brown eyes.

“But that’s not something you didn’t already know.”

“…”

“I don’t plan to cut ties with you, Alez. Nor ban you from the commune or turn you over to Amere,

but I need to know what I’m dealing with to take the right measures.”

“I can’t… be sure you won’t turn me in.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

When I looked back at Irena, I found a gentle, reassuring smile, the kind a teacher gives her students.

“Because Angelique would suffer for something that isn’t even her fault.”

I tossed my cigarette to the floor, letting it burn out on its own as I thought of what to say. I took a breath and sighed, watching the ember fade.

“Years ago, before I met Angelique, I was part of Amere. I wasn’t… just a soldier. I held a somewhat higher position.”

“That’s what I figured. How high, Alez?”

“I… I don’t know. I’m not sure. I mean, I don’t think it was that high, but it was probably important for what I was involved in.”

“Stop beating around the bush, please. Be clear. I’m really not against you, Alez.”

I don’t know when she got so close, but our eyes met when I turned to her.

“Yeah… yeah, I was someone important.”

“A Commander?”

“Not exactly. I was… a bodyguard. A protector, a caretaker, whatever you want to call it.”

“I’m not following.”

“Irena… how much do you know about Amere?”

“Enough.”

“About their highest ranks?”

“…Some.”

“Do you know… about the regional leaders?”

“…”

“Would you know who I’m talking about if I mention the Ahri?”

“…Yes, Alez. I know about that.”

“Then this will be easier than I thought.”

“What did you have to do with the Ahri? Bodyguard… don’t tell me.”

“I was part of his personal guard. His right hand. Wherever the Ahri… wherever Victor went, I was there. If something bothered him, I handled it. If a mission required precision only his best soldiers could manage… I was one of the chosen. Assassination, sabotage, reconnaissance. You name it, I did it for that… for that man. I never met anyone like him. The Ahri is terrifying. No one else could convince you his methods were the best for his plans. His cruelty— no, I can’t even call it cruelty. I couldn’t call it cruelty when I could only see it as ‘necessary.’ His orders were things no outsider could justify, but they sounded so convincing to us. Everything he said was true. Even if we didn’t believe it, deep down, we knew he was right.”

“Alez…”

“We were mercenaries. It’d be foolish to think we were anything more, but even so, part of us was committed to the cause. How could you not believe him?”

“You left, Alez.”

“We went and—”

“You left, Alez.”

I felt Irena’s hands take my face, forcing me to look at her. It wasn’t her usual confident expression, but the eyes of someone who felt the world would collapse if they didn’t act.

“Don’t say any more. I don’t want to hear more. It’s… more than enough.”

“Irena…”

“You walked away from Amere. You abandoned them. Even… even if you were in the palm of none other than the Ahri… you’re standing here in front of me today. That’s all that matters.”

“…”

I didn’t know what to say.

“Go home, Alez. There’s a girl waiting for you.”

“…”

“And take this book, it’s a gift.”

Irena knew far more than she let on. It was obvious. Her reaction to my brief story was too

strong for someone who hadn’t seen what the Ahri did firsthand. If she let me go, it was only… for Angelique.

I moved quickly, tucking the book away without looking at the cover and grabbing my bag. Without a goodbye, I headed for the door.

“Alez.”

I paused, glancing back at her.

“Alez… that girl depends on you. I don’t think… I don’t think I need to explain the mess you’re in.”

“You know I can’t stay here.”

“I know. But… I’ll look after her.”

“…”

“I’ll protect her and make sure nothing happens to her, so—”

“I’ll be back in a couple of weeks.”

“Alez…”

I stepped out and closed the door. I knew… I knew what she was going to say. Fuck, I know it now, and it still eats at me. Our little haven lasted far less than I expected. ‘Ten years,’ how optimistic I was. No, how foolish I was. It was never a good idea to begin with. What was I trying to do? A normal life? Here? In this world? If I can’t put her on a plane to the other side of the planet, it’s pointless to

pretend I can give her a normal life. And I'm not even sure about that, since I have no way of knowing what things are like across the Atlantic. How much time do we have? How long until a group of hundreds settles in the city looking for shelter? We can't defend this place with just the two of us. No, we'd need at least ten people to keep it safe…

Angelique… Is it really time to leave?

Angelique… Can I really be sure there's something better out there for you?

Angelique, the truth is, I don't feel good. I don't know how much longer I can be your shield.

Angelique, I have to do something about it.

Angelique…

. . .

Something’s wrong with my body.

I don’t know when it started or when it got worse. I’ve hidden it from Angelique as much as I could. It hasn’t been too hard; I’ve just had to push a little more than I used to, but…

It hurts. My body gives out after just a bit of effort. I get winded quickly when I run, and my arms shake when I hold my gun for too long. It’s like… I’ve lost strength in just a few years. Sometimes I get tired climbing stairs, and sometimes things slip from my hands as if my fingers can’t grip properly.

It doesn’t happen all the time. Some days I can give my all and barely feel tired, and others, just lifting Angelique leaves me exhausted. She doesn’t know. I don’t think she knows. She hasn’t noticed yet; I’ve never shown any sign in front of her.

I’m scared. I don’t know how much time I have left, and… I don’t know what state I’ll end up in. In the worst case, I could become nothing but a burden to Angelique. I can’t even imagine reaching that point. Angel is strong; she can fend for herself, but she doesn’t have as much experience as I do. Alone out there? I don’t know… I don’t know how long she’d last, and the thought terrifies me.

I’ll do something about it.

. . .

When I got home around noon, I heard the piano playing in the distance. It stopped the moment I closed the door. Seconds later, Angelique appeared at the top of the gallery, one hand on the railing, looking down at me.

“Did you manage to trade?”

“Yeah, I got just what we needed. We’ll be fine for a while. I heard the piano; does that mean you figured out what was wrong with your gun?”

She shook her head and started down the stairs.

“No, I just… got tired.”

“It’s rare for you to give up so easily.”

“I spent hours thinking, but I didn’t get anywhere.”

“Hm… well, we’ll look at it together later.”

Finally at my level, she nodded and began rifling through the bag I’d placed on the table.

“Angel…”

“Yeah?”

She spoke without looking at me. She pulled out a glass bottle, checked its contents, and put it back, doing the same with the other. Then she pulled out the book and gave a small smile as she read the title.

“I got some information.”

“Information?”

“About the new bandits roaming the city.”

Only then did she turn to me. As if reading my mind, her face took on a faint look of worry.

“It’s just the start of something much worse. We’re in for… tough months. I say months, but I don’t know if this could last years, or if the whole city might change completely.”

She didn’t say anything, just kept looking into my eyes. I reached into my coat, pulled out two cigarettes, lit mine, and handed her one with my lighter.

“A… commune, a big one, fell. Up north. They’re expecting a wave of thousands of people passing through here. They might even settle nearby. If that happens…”

“…”

“The fight for resources will be brutal. The little that’s left in the city will be gone in weeks, and the rest will be a constant struggle to survive. What we deal with now won’t even compare.”

“What are we going to do?”

She didn’t really want to hear my answer; I could see it in her dull eyes. I exhaled smoke and leaned a hand on the table. The table we’d moved here ourselves, in the home we’d shaped to our liking.

“I’m… not sure. I figured it’d be something like this, but not on this scale. If it’s really going to be like that, staying here isn’t a good option.”

Her hand holding the cigarette trembled at those last words.

“Where would we go? What place could be better?”

“Maybe south or—”

“We already went south!”

I managed to hide my surprise at her raised voice. Her voice, always almost a whisper. I chewed on the words that came to my mouth; I didn’t like what I was saying either.

Her face twisted with anger. It was strange, because it didn’t seem directed at me, but born from the utter helplessness of facing an unsolvable problem.

“We’ll find a place. Just like this house gave us shelter, there’s sure to be another.”

“Alez…”

“It makes no sense to argue about this, Angelique.”

“What you’re suggesting makes no sense! We traveled the whole continent looking for something better! There are only more bandits and Ameres who’ll shoot us without asking!”

“There are countries that haven’t completely fallen. If—”

“And they’ll reject us! We tried! It happened in Switzerland and Hungary! Where else do you want __”

“Do you think I want to do this?!”

She flinched, startled by my shout. The cigarette fell from her fingers, and she glanced at it but quickly fixed her fierce gaze on me.

“It doesn’t seem like you want to find an alternative either!”

“And what’s your plan to stay here?”

“Defend ourselves, what else?! Isn’t that what we’ve always done? If someone comes near, we shoot. It’s always been that way! Always! Since the day I met you! Why would it be different now?!”

“Idiot! That’ll work the first few times! What then? Do you know what’ll happen next? When word spreads there’s a big mansion with just two, TWO people, with weapons and food? What’ll you do when thirty people storm this place at once?”

“No…”

Our shouts echoed through the living room. Nale watched us from the couch, alert.

“No, what?! You don’t know?! Of course you don’t! Because there’ll be nothing left to do!”

“The commune!”

“What about the commune?”

“We can ask them for help! I’m sure Irena—”

“Irena only cares about the commune, Angelique! Don’t be so naive!”

“Then let’s just join the commune once and for all!”

“Impossible.”

“Why is it impossible?! Why is everything impossible?! Why are we forced to live like this?!”

Her voice broke, and I bit my tongue to keep from shouting again. I couldn’t tell her. I couldn’t explain why I couldn’t join the commune. I couldn’t. I can’t. Especially since… nothing’s stopping her from joining. Irena would welcome her with open arms, and as a member of the commune, Aleksej would never consider using her as leverage.

Our breathing was heavy, but the fight wasn’t over… and I reached my boiling point at her justified complaints.

“Because that’s how it is, Angelique! That’s the world! That’s—”

As if to prove a point, or like a child trying to win an argument, I turned and strode to the window by the door, flinging it open before looking back at her.

Beyond the window, the same lifeless, deserted avenue as always.

“That’s it! That’s the world you live in! And you know it damn well! You know exactly how things are out there!”

I marched toward her and grabbed her wrist, lifting it to her face.

“And you know because you’ve lived it! You know because you’ve pulled the trigger hundreds of times! You know— you know because you’ve stolen, killed, and taken advantage of others like any other bandit out there!”

Her eyes widened at my words, her lips trembled, and she yanked her hand away.

“We’re not like them!”

“What’s the difference?”

“We…! we…”

Only then did I realize something. Angelique has always seen us as the good guys. She’s always seen… me as the good guy in the story. That way, everything we do is justified. Because we’re the good guys. Because we have to survive.

But she’s not foolish; she knows reality is more complex.

I’m the fool for not realizing back then that this way of thinking is her defense mechanism, her way of coping with such a harsh reality.

‘I want to protect you like you protect me,’ she said once. I guess I didn’t grasp all the meanings of that phrase.

I’m the one who feeds her, defends her from the bad guys, teaches her to survive, and is always there for her. She just wants to be the same as me; she just wants to be one of the good guys.

“We… don’t have a choice.”

Her voice broke completely. She didn’t take her eyes off me, so I could easily see her tears pooling before she lowered her head and they hit the floor.

“No one does.”

“…”

“That’s why we live like this and do what we do.”

“…”

“Angelique…”

“I’m…”

She slowly raised her face, and the sight shattered me into a thousand pieces. Angelique wasn’t just crying; she was… devastated. There was no anger left in her gaze, only pure, raw, tangible sorrow. It was the kind of crying you let out in the face of the darkest misfortune, the worst disappointment. It was a cry of utter hopelessness. Her hands clutched her chest, as if trying to pull out a dagger lodged in her

heart. She looked into my eyes, showing a glint in her blue pearls I didn't want to see, and between sobs, she let out a single sentence that would burn into me for the rest of my life.

"I'm tired of living like this, Alez."

I was speechless.

I rushed to her and wrapped her in my arms. She didn't return the embrace, just cried and cried against my chest.

All I could think about was apologizing, but it would have been pointless. She wouldn't know exactly what I was apologizing for. She'd think it was for the shouting, when really, I'd be apologizing for not being able to give her a better life, the life she deserves. Because to me, Angelique deserves the whole world, but this world is horrible, unworthy of

her. So… I can’t offer her more than this little world she lives in, and even that is coming to an end soon.

…

But I know there’s more.

I know I can give her more.

Somehow, someway, I can give her something much, much better.

There must be something out there for both of us.

I’ll find it. Even if I have to turn this world upside down, destroy it, and rebuild it with my own hands, even if I have to sacrifice every drop of my

blood and every inch of my body, I'll find a place where she can live without fear. A place where she never has to pick up a gun again and can read as many books as she wants.

Even if it's the last thing I do, Angelique. Even if… even if I have to…

"Angel?"

She pushed me away with her arms. Not roughly, but with clear frustration. She didn't say a word or look at me, just fled to the second floor. I heard her bedroom door close, and I sighed. I saw both our cigarettes on the floor, half-smoked, but I didn't feel like picking them up.

I walked to the couch where the cat was still lying and sat beside him. He soon climbed onto my lap and settled to sleep while I stroked his back.

"…It was my fault, Nale. I lost it without thinking about what really hurts her. You should go to her; she needs you more than me."

But the cat just closed his eyes to rest, oblivious to anything but his own concerns. I leaned my head back and stared at the ceiling for a long time.

A long time…

. . .

When I thought I was about to fall asleep, I heard soft footsteps and the creak of the stairs behind me. I didn't turn, assuming Angelique had come down for water or food.

The steps approached and stopped beside the couch.

Angel looked at me with a face slightly less blank than usual, her eyes a bit red. We didn’t exchange words; she just sat next to me, as close as she could, and wrapped her arms around my waist, burying her face in my chest. I stroked her head with one hand while petting the cat with the other.

“Everything will be okay, Angelique.”

“…”

“We’re together.”

“…”

“We’re together, aren’t we?”

“…Yeah.”

“That’s more than enough. It always has been, and it always will be.”

“…”

“Because we’ll be together forever, Angelique.”

Her embrace softened, as if she were resting against me.

. . .

I’ll always be there for Angelique.

Always.

Mais c’était ma faute, pour ne pas avoir essayé de te comprendre.

Chapter Twenty-four: Ameretat I

+

Year 1991, the end of the Cold War.

December 25th, at 19:32. From the roof of the Hotel National, facing Red Square, a lone man wrapped in a thick fur coat gazed into the distance. Through the binoculars held before his eyes, he watched the flag of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics being lowered for the very last time. He lowered the binoculars and set them aside, then took the cigarette from between his lips and let it fall before him, crushing it beneath his boot. His face unreadable and his intentions uncertain; his green eyes shone, ready to seize a dawning opportunity.

From the travel bag at his side, he took out a mobile phone and switched it on. He dialed by memory the only number that would ever be used on

that phone, pressed the call button, and brought it to his ear.

“Is everything ready?.”

“Everything.”

At the answer from the other end, he looked up at the night sky.

“There will be no turning back after taking the first step.”

“I know. We know.”

“Are you not afraid?.”

“Are you?.”

“Yes, a little.”

“Then it is the right path.”

He smiled to himself and closed his eyes, denying himself the sight of the shooting star that flew overhead.

“… let’s begin.”

. . .

That day, Amere was born, or so I was told. Ameretat is the group’s full name, and it comes from the name of a deity in an ancient Persian religion. Its

founders were Kuzma Panov and Redrick Bahramian, though those were only the names that became known; it is an open secret that the original group was much larger. At least twenty people gathered in the days leading up to the fall of the USSR, no less than in Moscow, near the Kremlin.

Scientists, philosophers, politicians, soldiers, doctors, or writers. The only thing clear is that this gathering of intellectuals devised the foundations of what would become the Ameretat movement. The origin of the name is… a little more understandable when you know the story.

Redrick Bahramian was a Russian man, with a Russian mother and an Iranian father, born in Volgograd. Little is known about his life before that day in Moscow when he gave the order to begin Amere's operations. He was a KGB member in his early forties at the time, a man who had forged within himself a very simple creed: everything is wrong. He did not like the Western world, nor the Eastern one; he did not like believers, nor atheists; he looked on capitalists with disgust, as he did

communists. In his eyes, everything was shit, and everyone was wrong. Yet he himself was not some enlightened man whose ideas could create a perfect world; no, he did not even have a political doctrine to follow. He did not believe in such things. Redrick thought… that the real foundation, the true point of departure, the origin of a perfect civilization, could only be born at the hands of the original human being. He said people had been corrupted by ideals and religious beliefs, and that only by destroying the current world could the on that would raise men to God's height be born from its ashes.

A curious word, since he himself was not a devout believer. Even so, in memory of his origins and his own father's beliefs, he decided to name his organization after a deity from his father's faith.

According to those who claim to have known him, Redrick's life was steeped in secrecy, and even the person he claimed to be before forming Ameretat is doubted. The names of his parents are unknown, as is that of his wife, and

---

only one name is known among the several children he is rumored to have had: Viktor, the Ahri.

Kuzma Panov was different; transparent as crystal. Almost everything about him is known, since he never tried to hide anything. He entered the Ioffe Physical-Technical Institute in Saint Petersburg at a very young age where, if I recall correctly, he specialized in astrophysics. Though it is unknown how he and Bahramian met, it is known that they became friends, almost brothers, many years before the fall of the Soviet Union. According to Kuzma, Redrick was an extremely convincing man, with an impeccable bearing and a unique presence; he found himself bound to his cause the moment he heard him speak.

Kuzma was not just another cog in the machine; he was a central figure during the formation of Amere. He was respected and admired in equal measure by those who would become his students, and that alone would allow him to create a network

of influence that, in just a few years, would spread across nearly the entire Soviet state. He carefully analyzed his students and colleagues, with impeccable precision discerning who might become potential adherents to his cause; to Redrick's cause. He knew where to look. Young humanists who found no comfort in state propaganda, parents who lost their children in the Afghan war, and former soldiers who had spent time in the gulag after the Second World War, but also prostitutes, workers, and drunkards in bars. No one who could truly, in the deepest part of their soul, be convinced that the only way to fix this world was to destroy it would be discarded. Neither Kuzma nor Redrick sought the strongest, the smartest, or the richest; they sought the most loyal, the one who would be willing to give their life for the cause. And so, Ameretat grew…

By the mid-1980s, there was already at least one Ameretat agent in every Russian university, serving as a proxy between potential new members and Kuzma, who would ultimately decide who would be chosen to join the group. Though this is a little hard for me to believe, it is said that man never made a mistake; that there was never a single Amere who

regretted joining, and that the organization was never discovered. New members received financial help, enough to survive, and all kinds of support. That may have been somewhat difficult to achieve in the beginning, but it would have been eased by the admission of men and women from every social stratum and profession. As for the obligations members had, that is not clear to me. I imagine they would perform reconnaissance and information-gathering tasks, each from their little corner of the world. Moreover, no one was allowed to speak of Ameretat, not even to recruit new members; all they could do was pass Kuzma the identity of any candidate, and he would personally conduct the relevant investigation.

The second half of that decade marked Ameretat's first explosion of growth. The reduction of censorship and state persecution was the push many voices needed to rise, to express their discontent and hopelessness. For Kuzma, this was nothing less than a road opening before him. From writers and artists returning to the country from exile to politicians and soldiers watching, grain by grain, the might of the Soviet Union crumble. I do not

know the specific examples, but I do know that many of the most important names in the organization joined during those short five years, along with hundreds and hundreds of people who, though less relevant, were no less committed. It was then that Kuzma decided to appoint, for the first time since the creation of Amere, the members of the Greater Table. These people, who as I already mentioned were around twenty, would heed Kuzma's direct orders and be responsible for relaying them to every link in the chain. They were also the ones privileged enough to meet Redrick.

It was no small surprise for these high-ranking members when they entered that room in the Hotel National and saw that it was not Kuzma sitting at the head of the long table, but rather a tan-skinned man with dark hair and green eyes, a wrinkleless face and a calmer than exhausted expression, and a curious cross-shaped birthmark on the right side of his neck; Redrick Bahramian. Behind him, standing, was the unmistakable Kuzma Panov, with his usual appearance as a serious yet kind man of integrity, with his knitted vest, rectangular glasses, and neatly combed hair.

Only one phrase survives from that first meeting:

“This man here is Redrick Bahramian. He is Ameretat.”

It was no secret, neither to Redrick nor to anyone who knew Panov well, the enormous admiration and even devotion he felt for Amere’s leader. To Kuzma Panov, Redrick was nothing less than the messiah who had come to make humanity understand how far it had strayed from the path, from that path no one knew, but there it was. Bahramian’s word was for him almost sacred and had to be followed to the letter, even if the relationship between them was never that of a god and his servant, but rather that of inseparable colleagues. It sounds a little contradictory, but I can only believe what apparently Kuzma himself once said to those closest to him.

How long did it take that select group of members to spread their influence to every corner,

every street, every shadow of the nation? Not much more than a year after that first meeting. Like advanced-stage cancer, Amere spread across the country at a dizzying pace, and soon reached the highest government echelons and, though to a much lesser extent, neighboring countries.

However, and although its singular premise might suggest otherwise, Ameretat differed greatly from any ordinary cult. Its members were not brainwashed sick people, incapable of thinking for themselves. No, far from it. The Amere were people fully aware, absolutely rational when it came to their desire for a better world. Their mental processes genuinely led them to conclude that this was the only viable path, and on that basis they acted. It is… terrifying. Only then can one understand the damage they ultimately caused. The Ameres, especially the prominent members, were methodical and calculating people who knew how to make full use of any situation or event that could plant in a man's chest the seed of discontent. There were notable members involved in the promulgation of Glasnost, as there were during the Chernobyl incident. It was an Amere member who was the chief promoter of

the riots in Alma-Ata, and it was also several Amere who were the first to engage in private business in the territory of the Union once it was allowed. Everywhere, in every situation, there was at least one Amere. Every event was an opportunity to attract new members. It almost seems mythological that they managed to remain anonymous for so many decades with such aggressive recruitment techniques. Kuzma's merit, I suppose.

So we return to the beginning of this chapter. That very day marked the beginning of Amere's belligerent activities. Belligerent, of course, if understood as the preparation for what would one day become their armed uprising. It is said Redrick became much more active from then on, not only taking part in recruitment activities, but also using his broad circle of influence to acquire thousands and thousands of pieces of weaponry from all over the world. He strongly believed in his own gift for persuasion, and insisted that any army from any nation could be easily defeated if enough screws were loosened. Looking back, he was not so wrong.

The following years of the group were very fruitful. Thousands and thousands of new members, tons of military material acquired and safeguarded with the utmost care. Ameretat's network would have been, had it not been an absolute secret carefully kept, the envy of any other clandestine organization. Through Kuzma it is known that Redrick often looked out the window from that same room in the Hotel National, smiling to himself, deciding when the opportune moment to strike would be. Even with the brotherly relationship between them, Redrick never revealed to Kuzma who exactly those important contacts in the government were that allowed him to approach and recruit with relative ease among the highest social strata; in his own words, it was for the safety of the entire group.

Almost thirty years passed until an already elderly Redrick decided the time to act had come. It is unknown whether it was global political instability or the growing fear of nuclear war, but something convinced him that the second phase of his plan had finally to be set in motion, around the year 2019. If you ask me, I will tell you the answer

is much simpler and more human: Redrick did not have much time left to live. Someone with aspirations and dreams so magnificent must surely have been a very proud man, and would not want to die before seeing his dream manifest in reality.

Redrick Bahramian died of natural causes in the year 2023. He was unable to see the world he longed for, but he did see the foundations of society give way before Ameretat's power; before his power. He left no direct successor, though that does not make Amere a leaderless organization. Power passed into the hands of… something like a council of regional leaders. One for each continent or region of importance. I only know Viktor, who is the leader of the region concerning Western Europe. I know there are specific leaders for Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East, the east and west of Russia, China, East Asia, the United States, Canada, Mexico and Central America, northern South America, southern South America, and surely several more assigned to vital areas or countries of great importance.

Kuzma is still alive, and in good health… at least that was the last I heard of him. The regional leaders begged him to take command after Redrick's death, but he refused. For him, Redrick himself was Ameretat, so no one could take his place as the supreme head of the organization. Instead, he took on the role of being one more voice in the discussion whenever the leaders meet. I… was able to see him a few times. Given how much he adored his father, it is no surprise that he showed special interest in Viktor, and the latter referred to old Kuzma as one more member of his family. I even greeted him and shook his hand. I spoke with him, he asked about my life… Kuzma… I hate to say it, but he is not a bad man. But that is not what I want to talk about.

This was only a brief introduction to what Amere is and what it represents.

It is stupid, it is childish. It is nonsense, and above all it goes against the most basic common sense.

So I ask myself… how? How could this happen? How could it go so far? I do not plan to write an essay about why I think the very mass that gives shape to Amere is an anomaly with no reason to exist, but… but I do not understand it.

Maybe someone out there can find the reason, but I cannot.

But, look through the window. Entire countries reduced to memories… and all for one man’s desire.

Was this what Redrick Bahramian wanted?

December, 2024

“Alez, finally. Did they give you your things?”

“Almost all of them…”

I said, checking my 92, which did not have a single extra scratch compared to how it looked when they had taken it from me.

“Where is my rifle?”

“Rifle?”

“A CZ-805. It was the one I used when they captured me.”

“Hm… you did not have a rifle when they brought you to the cell. The boys must have kept it.”

“Which boys?”

“The same ones who captured you, obviously. Forget about the weapon, I will get you another. We are not going to take inventory among the thousands of members in the area to find a rifle. We do not have time either, we leave in three hours.”

I did not object. I did not have any particular fondness for that rifle either. It would have been different if they had taken my pistol.

“They are preparing the helicopter on the roof. We will leave here, make a stop in Novo Mesto to refuel and handle a few matters, and then head for Grenoble. We will also need to make another stop to refuel, but that one will be quick.”

I was not all that interested in what I was hearing, so I kept focusing on making sure my preferred weapon was in perfect condition. Once satisfied, I tucked it away beneath my clothes and looked out the window while Viktor spoke.

I was in a classroom like any other, its interior altered to serve as a dormitory. The four members of the Ahri's personal guard (Laurent, Rico, Flavio, and I) shared it, which had created a somewhat uncomfortable atmosphere the night before. Sleeping beside my torturers was… I could barely sleep. It was around nine in the morning and sunny. In the Ahri's words, a beautiful day to fly.

"How are your wounds?"

"They are no big deal."

"Do they hurt?"

I heard one of the beds creak and turned to find him sitting on the one opposite mine.

"What are we going to France for?"

“Do you care?”

“Is there anything left in France?”

“Not much, some cities and towns. Informants from several communes reported there has been a lot of movement lately. Entire caravans of vehicles with armed people inside, some aircraft, closed roads… and it is not our doing, so I have an idea of what is happening.”

“Stateless.”

“Of course not. They do not have the cohesion to orchestrate things that big. Stateless are little more than better-armed looters.”

“Then?”

“A resistance.”

“How?”

I watched him search the pocket of his jacket and pull out two honey candies. He offered me one, but I refused, so he put both in his mouth before continuing.

“Life finding a way. Survivors from different areas traveling from one side to the other, joining together, forming alliances… I suppose they have had enough time to form an organized group without us noticing.”

“It is hard to think something like that could have happened without Amere noticing.”

“We do not have as large a network as you might think. If we take a city, destroy it, and then leave, nothing remains behind to take care of the survivors. We only have the communes, and they are easy to avoid if you are careful.”

“What will you do?”

“What will ‘we’ do, you mean.”

“…”

“I will go back to France and crush that resistance. It is going to take time, though I hope not too much. A resistance, as if I did not already have enough problems… Amere is not going to stop expanding because of this, but it will surely slow our advance.”

“What do you know about them?”

“Almost nothing. That is why we stop in Novo Mesto. I have to speak with some people who have information, and others who will give me advice on how to proceed. I will also have to leave the more distant places under someone else’s charge. Damn it, I still have not decided who. But…”

He stretched out on the bed and, in one motion, stood up.

“It is not something you need to worry your little head about.”

“My weapon…”

“Yes, I will find you something when I have time. It can wait until Grenoble. Trust me, you will not

need to fire a shot until we get there."

"But…"

"No buts. I want you on the roof in two hours."

As if the superficial warmth he had shown before had never existed, he left the room without sparing me even a glance. I looked out the window, and there was nothing interesting on the other side.

. . .

I had once seen a UH-60 in flight, back when I was in the army, but I had never had the chance to board one. I had not even stood this close to one with all three engines roaring like that time. It is no exaggeration to say that, had I not held a firm stance, the wind whipped up by the spinning blades alone

could have knocked me flat onto the ground. I found it almost amusing that the Ahri, being noticeably smaller than me, seemed unaffected by it. He walked beneath that massive rotor with complete ease, approaching the aircraft at a calm pace. I would not have heard him even if he had shouted, so he simply gestured with his hand that it was time to get on board. When the sliding door shut behind me, I found myself inside a cabin that seemed to have been… at least slightly modified to the Ahri's preference. The layout was efficient, with only six seats. I took one and glanced around. Rico, Laurent, Flavio, and the Ahri were there—no one else. None of them paid me much attention, until Rico motioned for me to buckle up. Even inside the helicopter, the noise was deafening. At his insistence, I grabbed the headset near my seat and put it on.

"Can you hear me?"

I nodded at Rico, who clicked his tongue.

“Use your words, idiot.”

I took the microphone and brought it closer to my mouth.

“I hear you.”

“Good. First time in a helicopter?”

“No. But…”

“You must be used to flying like cattle.”

It was the Ahri who cut in, without taking his eyes off the window beside him.

“This helicopter is mine. You will be flying in it more often than you think. Get used to it.”

He said a few more things, though they were not directed at me, but at the pilots. I stayed quiet. Leaning back against the frame of the helicopter, I… looked out the window again as it lifted off.

. . .

It is pointless to talk about the stop in Novo Mesto. Right now, at least. I spent almost all that time standing beside the helicopter anyway. Waiting for the Ahri to return. After that, the meeting with Kuzma… but I will detail that later, perhaps.

I want to focus more on what happened when we arrived in Grenoble.

The sight that presented itself to me when I stepped down from the UH-60 was nothing short of Dantesque.

We landed directly at the city's airport. Not because it was the most suitable place logistically speaking, but because the whole site was now some sort of central Ameretat base in the region. It was the first time I had seen anything like it. Attack aircraft, artillery pieces, training troops, it was, by all appearances, a military base.

Stunned, standing there while the blades ceased spinning above me, watching the spectacle around me, I did not see the Ahri pass by my side, nor the rest of the guard disembarking. Only Flavio's pat on the back brought me to my senses.

"Alez."

I turned to look at him like someone running into an acquaintance on the street.

“Do not lag behind. We are not waiting for you.”

There was no animosity in his voice, only a particular coldness; he was merely stating a fact, without making any value judgment. He already saw me as one more member of the team, and he did not want the Ahri to have to turn around and call me over. It was a mechanical gesture, a necessary gesture. I do not know whether I felt relieved at being seen as just another man, or terrified by that same fact.

I understood that for the Ahri, traveling by helicopter was not much different from taking a taxi. He had us enter a particular room inside the airport. In earlier times it would have served as the office of some travel agency, but at that moment it was a meeting room specially prepared for the Ahri’s visit. We entered, still carrying our backpacks and

suitcases, and found several members of the organization of presumably high rank although, judging by their reactions, none of them came close to my new boss.

“I want the short version, I have not eaten anything yet.”

He said, sitting at the head of the long table in the center of the room. I followed Flavio’s example and stayed standing nearby, looking around. There was nothing hanging on the walls, but there were many nails that I suppose had previously held images related to the aforementioned travel agency. I thought that if they had not bothered to remove them, it was because the room had been hastily repurposed. Then some furniture, also empty, and at the far end of the table, a projector displaying a map of France on a whiteboard. There were several unknown men on that same side, but only one stood out. A frail, aged-looking one, with a scar running from the right side of his chin to his neck and almost white eyes. He wore a military uniform without insignia… which struck me as strange, ridiculous,

and unnecessary. He greeted the Ahri… and then looked at me.

“Sir, that…”

“New member.”

“Ours?”

“Mine.”

“Then…”

“Personal guard, nothing that concerns you. Can we continue?”

“… yes, sir.”

He took his eyes off me, but not before reading me with them.

That gratuitous distrust gave me a certain sense of calm; at least I was not among idiots who accepted everything their leader told them. There was doubt, and doubt was always the cradle of true understanding.

…

Where did I hear those words…?

“I know you have already been informed, in broad terms, of the situation, so I will be brief. What initially were only minor riots became a formal uprising.”

“Where?”

“Across the entire region. We have received reports throughout French territory speaking of the rapid growth of a nationalist resistance. These are not twenty or thirty lunatics seeking freedom, but hundreds or thousands of individuals organizing to take control of the country back. I fear… that although it sounds barbaric to put it in these terms, it is the only way I can express it. The cities were left with too many civilians still capable of fighting. They want to put up a fight.”

“Did this not happen in Portugal as well? It should be easy to solve.”

“This is not like Portugal or western Austria, sir.”

My arms, crossed over my chest, tensed against my will. Flavio's gaze settled on me, and I did my best to remain expressionless.

"We know the resistance has been communicating from one end of the territory to the other using VHF equipment."

"But…"

"But they are not idiots. All their communications are encrypted, and we have not been able to track them despite following their trail for days. It is almost certainly a cipher they invented themselves."

"What have they done so far?"

“We concluded that this resistance was organized and worthy of our attention no more than a week ago. Since then they have raided a temporary base in Blois and some outposts in various parts of the territory. Before that, we recorded another couple of attacks that could easily be attributed to this resistance.”

“Casualties?”

“In the dozens.”

“Oh, shit…”

The Ahri let out a whistle of surprise and admiration, and I nearly did the same. I had witnessed Amere’s strength myself. For a civilian resistance group to have inflicted such damage… I felt nothing less than admiration.

“Right now there are at least five air patrols circling the Lyon district in search of hostile activity, in addition to many ground search teams. We want at least this portion of the territory to be safe for us and our activities. Allowing ourselves to be displaced by the enemy would be—”

“Bring all ground patrols back right now.”

The Ahri’s command made all of us in the room turn to look at him.

“…sir?”

“Just do what I said.”

“… of course, right away.”

Without asking why, the almost elderly man gestured to one of the soldiers standing near him, who hurried out of the room.

“… sir, may I…”

“Where are you from?”

The man without insignia on his uniform made a confused expression. The Ahri, for his part, stood up, pulled a candy from his right pocket, and popped it into his mouth.

“Where were you born?”

Still trying to follow my boss’s train of thought, the man whose shadow was cast over the map projection answered.

“Berlin, sir.”

“Mhm. And you?”

The one being pointed at was one of the nearby soldiers.

“A-ah! R-Rome, sir.”

“Of course. Alez.”

Hearing my name felt as if ice-cold water had been thrown down my back.

“Where were you born?”

“I… Vienna.”

“So… nobody here was born in Lyon. Did I forget to ask anyone?”

No one said a single word, silence reigned in the room for a few seconds.

“You… I do not remember your name.”

“Rost, sir.”

“Your first name, not your surname.”

The man swallowed before continuing.

“Luther.”

“Luther. I do not doubt the intelligence work you must have done upon arriving here, nor the willingness of Ameretat soldiers to dedicate their entire lives to the cause, but there is something that does not sit right with me. We are not dealing with soldiers raised on the other side of the country and sent here to defend the territory, Luther. Your men out there will be met by men and women born and raised on this land. People who have spent their whole lives walking these fields, raised on the very same streets your soldiers patrol without any prior knowledge beyond what they saw on a map. The—”

“Sir!”

The Ahri’s firm, calm, yet imposing voice was interrupted by a slammed door and the voice of the soldier who had earlier left the room. The soldier

himself went pale upon realizing he had interrupted the Ahri, but the man I now called boss only smiled.

“Speak, soldier.”

“Y-yes! Sir, we lost contact with two of the ground patrols near Annecy! There is no response at all!”

“Uh, how timely…”

The Ahri concluded, biting his candy while he flashed a smile at the same officer, who stood there open-mouthed, alternately staring at the agitated soldier and the map beside him.

“Review your strategy, Luther. I do not want any more unnecessary casualties.”

“S-sir—”

“We must be more cautious. These are not just neighbors with a handful of weapons trying to defend what little they have left; they are an armed resistance willing to face us. Treat them with the same care you would give a conventional army… if not a little more. Is that clear?”

“… crystal clear, sir. Expect good news.”

Perhaps seeing that the Ahri was not truly scolding him but effectively advising him for a better future strategy, Luther relaxed and said those words with noticeable conviction.

The Ahri nodded with that same smile still lingering on his face.

. . .

“What do you think, Alez?”

We were each assigned an individual room, and the Ahri visited mine before I had even finished arranging the few pieces of furniture to my liking; from what I had heard from the Ahri, we were going to be there for quite a few months.

“What do I think about what?

I said, leaning against the only window in the room to light a cigarette. Laurent managed to get good cigarettes, I do not know from where.

“About what happened back there. If you ask me, I do not know whether overestimating the resistance could work against us. Maybe they really are just a

handful of desperate civilians wanting to die for something, and giving them too much importance would make us waste resources we could allocate to some other, more… problematic areas.”

“Why does it matter what I think?”

I could approach his question from many angles, but what caught my attention most was that he had come to me looking for an opinion.

“The boys in my personal guard are not there just to protect me, Alez. And are you not going to offer me a cigarette? To me, your boss?”

His casual, almost friendly tone was reassuring, but it disgusted me. We were not friends. We would never be friends. I handed him a cigarette, and he tucked it into his pocket without so much as a grimace.

“Thanks, but I do not smoke.”

I wanted to punch him. He was probably trying to be funny or… I do not know, I never fully understood that man.

“What else are we for?”

“To point out things I might be overlooking, of course. Everyone comes from different places, and that means everyone has different viewpoints and ideas, so from time to time I like to hear my boys’ opinions…”

“I see…”

“So, tell me, what do you think?”

“Hm…”

The smoke rising from my lungs darkened my vision for a few moments.

“You are not overestimating them. According to the information that was circulating when I was still in the army, the French had the lowest desertion rate. In other words, it is rare to find a French stateless man out there. They exist, but they are a minority.”

“Hm, interesting. What does that mean?”

“That those soldiers who were left lost battle after battle, and those who still wanted to keep fighting when the country fell, all of them must have ended up somewhere. It is not crazy to think that a good number of those in the resistance are ex-soldiers. Particularly in Lyon I saw with my own eyes many

men who loved their country being left aside, lost in the fire. You are not overestimating them, but it is not right to treat them as a conventional army either.”

Midway through my monologue, the Ahri discarded that air of carelessness he always wore and let a trace of genuine surprise show on his face, like someone watching a runner go from last place to winning the race.

“Ah… How should I treat them?”

“You broke into a man’s house to steal his things. You have companions, but the man is armed to the teeth and knows the house down to the last detail. How would you take him down?”

It took him about five seconds, but little by little the Ahri broke into a broad smile before clapping

mockingly, taking short steps backward, nodding his head without taking his eyes off me.

“Wonderful. Truly, wonderful! I get it, I get it now. Thank you, Alez, I will leave you in peace. We will see each other at dinner, if you are hungry.”

“Shit, it was right there and I did not see it…” he said as he walked away, closing the door and leaving me alone in that room.

I looked down, and half my cigarette remained.

I looked out the window at the sky, and it could barely have been close to six in the afternoon.

I looked down at the platform of that airport turned military base, and saw a truck in which armed

men climbed one after another, heading toward some point of death that escaped my knowledge.

I… I was already one of them too.

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